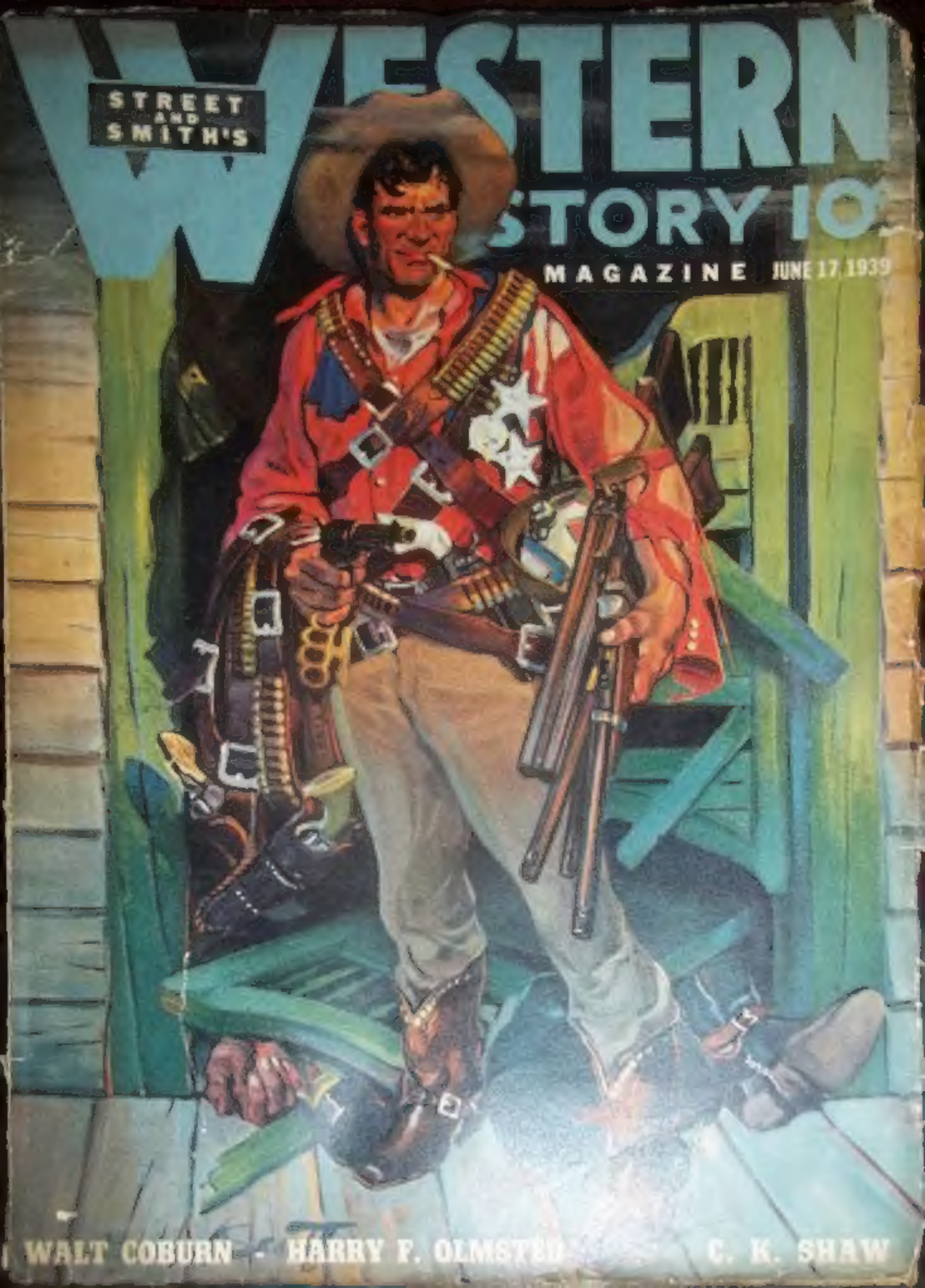
STREET AND SMITH'S

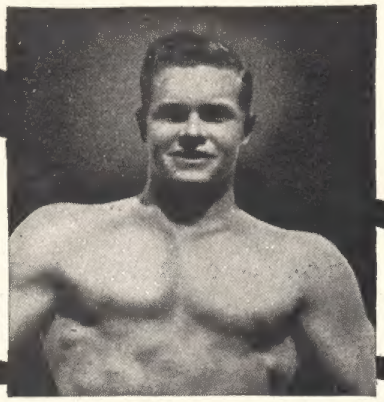
WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE JUNE 17 1939



WALT COBURN - HARRY F. OLMSTED - C. K. SHAW

HE Mailed This Coupon



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 229
115 East 23rd Street,
New York, N. Y.

I want proof that your system of DYNAMIC TENSION will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your FREE BOOK—"Everlasting Health and Strength"—and full details of your 7-DAY trial offer.

Name J. G. O'Brien
(Please print or write plainly)
ADDRESS 764 Ellsworth Street
CITY San Francisco STATE Cal.

This is the coupon J. G. O'Brien sent in to get my FREE Book. Yours is below—clip it NOW!

...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title, *"The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."*

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man—and also won one of my Atlas-Champion, Sterling Silver Cups for his physical improvement. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! Dynamic Tension WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"—*J. G. O'Brien.*

Let Me Prove I Can Make You a New Man!

Would *you* like to have a handsome build—greater physical development—a strong, muscular body? Then listen to this:

I, myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won *twice* and have held *ever since*, against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension.* It is a *natural* method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

Silver Cup Being Given Away
This cup, 14" high on a mahogany base, will be awarded to pupil who makes greatest physical improvement in next 3 months.

Accept My 7-DAY Trial Offer

Do *you* want a better build? Are *you* dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my "Dynamic-Tension" method I will make you a **New Man**—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 62F, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your **FREE** book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY trial offer.

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FREE BOOK
ON DYNAMIC TENSION

Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally *today.* I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 62F, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

Be a Radio Expert

Many make $30 $50 $75 a week

I will train you at home for many Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

J. E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute
Established 25 years

He has directed the training of more men for the Radio Industry than anyone else.

Broadcasting Stations

Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for fascinating jobs and pay up to $5,000 a year.

Set Servicing

Fixing Radio sets in spare-time pays many $5, $10, $15 a week extra while learning. Full time repair pays as much as $30, $50, $75 a week.

Loud Speaker Systems

Building, installing, servicing and operating public address systems is another growing field for men well trained in Radio.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

$50 Monthly in Spare Time

"I work on Radio part time, still holding my regular job. Since enrolling seven years ago, I have averaged around $50 every month." JOHN B. MORISSETTE, 809 Valley St., Manchester, N. H.

Makes $50 to $60 a Week

"I am making between $50 and $60 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N.R.I." H. W. SPANGLER, 136½ S. Gay St., Knoxville, Tenn.

Operates Public Address System

"I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is $170 a month." R. H. ROOD, R. 136, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.

Radio offers you many opportunities for well-paying spare time and full time jobs. And you don't have to give up your job, leave home or spend a lot of money to train to get these jobs—to become a Radio Expert.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75, a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make $5, $10, $15, a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

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I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.

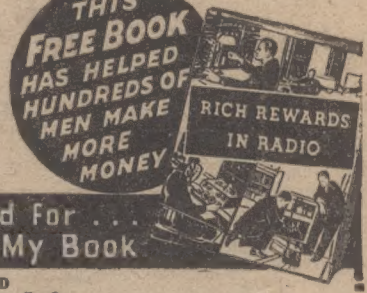
Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me, if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 9FD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.



This Coupon is Good for . . . One FREE Copy of My Book

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9FD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

CONTENTS JUNE 17, 1939

VOL. CLXXIV NO. 4

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

SATAN WAS ON HIS TRAIL . . . . . Walt Coburn 9

—but the Gaynors knew a double-crosser like Big Mike Harlin wasn't beyond making a deal with the devil. . . .

DEATH AT SUNRISE . . . . . C. K. Shaw 61

The justice of the Texas Rangers was swift and sure, but would Captain Steve Homan mete it out before he discovered the blood bond between himself and the man he had sentenced to the firing squad?

A SERIAL

RENEGADE ROUNDUP (third of five parts) . William Colt MacDonald . 101

The evidence against him had vanished into thin air, but Larry Crockett knew it was only a matter of time until he would be identified as "the man in the Oregon breeches."

SHORT STORIES

SIX-PISTOL MEDICINE . . . . . Harry F. Olmsted . . . 37

Though old Jeff Pittman had bought the Hillkitty Kid's guns, he knew someone else had won the young owlhooter's loyalty. . . .

TERROR OF SALADA HILLS . . . . . Anson Hard 51

The Salada Hills held a rich prize for a mustanger, but Dal Merrick knew he'd have to tangle with a pair of dryguIchers if he wanted to win it.

TROUBLE AT MAGGIE GULCH . . . . Ray Humphreys 85

Old Adolphus was going great guns on his sitdown strike until he discovered he was sitting on a smoldering volcano!

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

THE STORY OF THE WEST . . . . . Gerard Delano 34

Episode LVIII in the making of the cattle country. . . .

BRAND INSPECTORS . . . . . Charles L. McNichols . . 36

—the cowman's first line of defense against the cow thief.

GHOST TOWNS OF THE WEST . . . . John A. Thompson . . . 47

Old Mexico. Ghost towns seem even more ghostly down below the border. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

The Roundup . . . . . The Editor 5

Guns And Gunners . . . . . Phil Sharpe 93

Where To Go And How To Get There . . . John North 95

Mines And Mining . . . . . John A. Thompson . . . 97

The Hollow Tree . . . . . Helen Rivers 99

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THE ROUNDUP

THERE'S certainly a touch of the Old West and the New in the way some of our writers get their stories. For instance, when Charles L. McNichols was getting the data for THE HILLMAN RANCH, the latest in his Great Cattle Ranches series, he tells me that the owner, Wayne Hillman, who is a very well known and popular amateur radio operator, was interviewed, via radio, by one of McNichols' friends in Los Angeles.

Amateurs from all over the country called back and said it was the most interesting conversation they had ever heard on the air. The ranch certainly intrigued those boys! Originally the Hillman Ranch, known as the Rancho Estrella, was a Spanish grant and has been a cattle spread for nearly a hundred and forty years. We assure our readers that there's a treat in this story which will appear very soon.

We've had so many letters of praise for the colorful and authentic articles by Mr. McNichols that we wrote him asking him to tell us about himself. Here is his reply, and it certainly goes to prove that this entertaining writer gets every bit of his information right on the spot.

"I was raised on about a dozen different Indian reservations as my father was an agent for the Indian Bureau, then a special agent, and then an inspector. When I was fourteen (maybe fifteen) I was sent to Los Angeles to a prep school, but I ran into a couple of Indian boys I knew who were working in the pictures and went out to the old Universal lot and got a job as a rider in a Western.

"I went back to school when my folks caught up with me, but worked in the pictures during my vacations. I also rode twice for Price & Davis, trail-drive outfit—until the World War. I was then a sophomore in college. I enlisted in naval aviation and ran into a series of minor disasters that piled up in a permanent line-of-duty disability and five years in hospitals.

"I finally went back to Stanford and got my degree. Then back to work for the pictures until '29. when I was again laid up. It was then I started to write. I sold the first article I sent to Western Story.

"In '33 I was fit again so I bought a thirty-five-dollar automobile and with my wife and another, slightly less disable, vet—Lyle Graham—started out to visit every well-known ranch, every historical spot and Indian reservation in the Far West.

"So far we have covered about forty-five thousand miles over California, Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Had to take to the bunk again in January '38 and this is the first time I've been able to get out and take a trip since, and it sure is great to be feeling good and out on the road again.

"Just been to Costa Mesa, where they have put a shotgun guard over an old ranchhouse to keep out the Indians. Indians got in there once, tore out the floors in all but one of the rooms and, working nights, dug out ten or twelve tons of dirt. They admit they are after treasure but won't tell anybody just what it is. The general opinion is that they have found something already, because the two families that are

suspected of doing the digging have blossomed out with almost new Cadillacs.

"The estate that owns the ranch is fit to be tied. Can't prove who was digging, don't know what they got, and don't know what there might be to get! Expect to uncover more facts by letter. You probably will be getting a story on it in about a month.

"We also went to Victorville, where I investigated the rumor that the British government is starting up a project for the breeding of cavalry mounts. Lots of feverish activity surrounded by a lot of shush-shush."

"I don't remember when I first started to read your magazine," says Hugh Hardy, of Meadow Lake, Saskatoon, Canada, "but it was many years ago, and I want to say that I think Western Story is 'ace high.' I'm a cowhand myself and I sure do appreciate yarns by genuine cowmen such as Walt Coburn and so many of your other range authors." Mr. Hardy has some valuable suggestions concerning the kind of stories and articles he likes as well as the illustrators he favors, and we only wish we had room to reprint his helpful letter in full. "Before I say *adios,*" he writes in closing, "I would like to make one more suggestion. Surely folks would be interested in articles on roping. I mean range roping, not trick roping, and it seems much could be written on the subject as there are so many different throws—ones used on foot, when mounted, et cetera." We wonder how many of you all out there would like to see some articles on this subject? Remember, folks, we're always more than glad to have your criticisms and suggestions. For we want to give you just the kind of magazine you enjoy most.

"I was guiding three fellows on a deer-hunting trip into the back country of the Kern River," Eugene R. Dutcher wrote me not long ago, "and we were sitting around the campfire smoking an after-grub cigarette when suddenly there came a scream or screech from the dark timber beyond the firelight.

" 'Cougar,' cried one of my party, reaching for his sporting rifle.

" 'Over there!' whispered another. 'I can see his eyes.'

"Well, the eyes turned out to be the shiny bottom of the bean can I'd opened that night. And a few minutes' search of the timber with a flashlight revealed a little old owl perched on a limb. Blinking in the light, he screeched again, and somehow the sound didn't seem half so vicious now that we saw what made it.

"I wondered then and I still wonder if an experience like this wasn't how the story started that mountain lions scream and cry like women.

"I raised one of the big cats from a kitten until he outweighed me by a good fifty pounds. He was raised with a hound dog and the two of them ran loose. The big fellow liked his trout fresh out of the water and he would go fishing with me like a well-behaved dog. I've stepped on his long tail by mistake and nearly lost a finger once—that was my mistake, too—but never did I hear him scream or even come close to it. He'd pur and meow like any tabby cat. And perhaps had he met another cougar in combat he would have squalled with all the banshee-like power of tomcats under your bedroom window.

"But as for the theory that cou-

gars scream as they prowl the woods, I don't believe it. The big cats are always hunting, and a good hunter doesn't go shouting out his presence. I've met many who felt they had heard cougars scream, but never one who actually saw him doing it. Maybe I'm all wrong. Doggoned if I know."

We're mighty sorry space forbids us printing the fine photograph Dutcher sent us of himself and his kitten, "taken while he was still getting his grub from a sugar nipple." We assure you all it was quite a "cat."

Of course you're already acquainted with that rootin'-tootin' salty hombre on this week's cover, and now let's read the brand of the artist who painted him—H. W. Scott.

He was born in Virginia City, Montana. His daddy died when Scott was very young and it was tough going on the home ranch. So Mrs. Scott packed H. W. and his brother and moved down East to Connecticut. H. W. credits his mother with giving him unlimited encouragement and teaching him the secret of hard work.

He studied music under Leopold Woulfsohn and has played in recitals at the Academy of Music and Aeolian Hall. His musical career ended, however, when at nineteen he entered the service during the World War. Scott spent twenty months in France, six months attached to the second Lafayette Escadrille as flier and mechanic. He played football and baseball in the Paris League and is still tossing them over. "When I lose," he admits, "they heave pop bottles at me —when I win they shower me with ice cream!"

When Scott returned from the War he entered the Pratt Institute to study illustration, and it was when he graduated that he says, "the fun began. I pounded the streets and was thrown out of plenty of art departments, worked in two commercial advertising houses, and finally, somehow, I got by the art editors of *Liberty Magazine, Collier's, Columbia,* et cetera, and the last ten years I've had my head under the block at Street & Smith's. I've been back at the Pratt Institute for the past seven years, but now they call me instructor.

"As a cover artist I try to express my emotions rather than the technical side of a picture," he told us. "If I can make you laugh or give you a thrill, I'm happy. I love my work even though I bear down eighteen hours at a clip. I'm very lucky to have a fine wife who understands me and is a lot of help. I've also two swell boys, a home and a studio in the country with a small stable with horses and a pony, three cats and a dog, and I do plenty of riding on the side."

Next week's issue brings Western Story readers a new and thrilling full-length novel by T. T. Flynn—THE DEVIL'S LODE. Border renegades had turned the gold-rich Concho Mine into a maelstrom of powder smoke, and it didn't take Paso Brand, who had been running a race with trouble ever since he crossed the Rio Grande, long to discover that the only pay a hombre was likely to earn working for Bull Gardner was a bullet with his name on it. Don't miss this colorful, action-filled yarn! There'll be plenty of other top-notch fiction in next week's big issue, and don't forget that there's always a full line-up of interesting and informative departments and articles.

What have the movies done for you?

The movies are not only entertaining. They, somehow or other, help people solve the problems that arise in everyday life. Literally thousands of letters are received at the PICTURE PLAY offices from people in all walks of life, telling how pictures helped to solve the problems of their daily lives.

So the PICTURE PLAY editors decided to start a contest in which readers are invited to tell how a picture helped them solve a problem. More important than beautiful writing is the sincerity of the thought behind the letter. For winning letters each month, PICTURE PLAY is giving away splendid prizes that you will want.

For all details on this contest, and sample letters, get your current issue of

Picture Play

NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

SATAN WAS ON HIS TRAIL

By WALT COBURN

SATAN WAS ON HIS TRAIL

BY WALT COBURN

CHAPTER I

CALLING THE DEAL

ROY GAYNOR lined the sights of his .30-40 carbine on Mike Harlin who was driving his sorrel team along the wagon road that led to the KG home ranch. The range was less than a hundred yards and Mike Harlin's big bulk made an easy target as he lazed in the sagging seat of his yellow buckboard.

Roy Gaynor was squatted behind a patch of buck brush, hat brim slanted to shade his eyes. His left eye squinted shut and there was a faint, mirthless grin on his young, square-jawed, tanned face. It was not a pleasant grin, and the gray eye that looked along the steel barrel of the carbine was cold and merciless.

But no roar of gunfire sounded. Ray let the big cattle buyer drive out of sight around a bend in the wagon road without pulling the trigger. The stock of the carbine came away from his shoulder. He eased the gun hammer down and levered the cartridge from the breech into the palm of his hand, shoving it into the magazine.

"I can't cut 'er," he muttered. "I couldn't bushwhack the big ox."

He stood erect and cussed the cloud of dust that was settling again down on the rutted wagon road. Trickles of sweat coursed through the gray dust that powdered his face. He walked back to where his saddled horse stood concealed by the brush and shoved the carbine into its saddle scabbard.

There was a half-emptied pint of whiskey in his saddle pocket. He took a big swallow of the sun-warmed liquor and almost gagged. He threw the bottle away without putting back the cork. The tinkle of shattered glass pulled the tight-lipped grin sideways across his face.

"Even half-stewed," he told his horse, "I couldn't git the job done, pony. After waitin' half a day, I let the big son git away. So we might as well go on down to the ranch and face the music."

Roy Gaynor was somewhere in his early twenties. Tall, long-muscled, clean-cut. Liquor had flushed his face and his eyes were bloodshot. He had used whiskey to bolster his nerve, and now the reaction and let-down left him almost nauseated. It was still an hour until sundown and the day had lost little of its heat. Montana in September can be almighty hot.

Roy mounted his big bay horse and rode down the slope toward the wagon road. He had no desire to face the ordeal that was waiting for him at the KG Ranch. He would rather have faced a wounded grizzly with his bare hands than meet his father after big Mike Harlin had announced the reason for his visit.

Then he saw a man riding a big blue roan horse come down from some high slope of the timbered butte. Roy Gaynor's gray eyes narrowed as he pulled up and waited for the rider to overtake him. Even

at a long distance he recognized the horse and man. He wondered if Sheriff Riley Burch had been watching him. The law officer was a hard man to figure out. He had a bothersome habit of knowing a lot more than he ever let on.

Even when he was wagon boss for the KG outfit and Roy was learning how to handle a beef herd, Riley had shown a sometimes bothersome and annoying big-brother tendency that had bred distrust and dislike in Roy Gaynor's heart.

RILEY BURCH was only five or six years older than Roy Gaynor, but he had a man's settled ways while Roy was still wild and reluctant to shoulder the responsibilities that were part of his job as ramrod for his father's KG outfit.

Roy Gaynor was a top cowhand. Even his stern-tempered father had to admit that. There wasn't a better wagon boss in Montana than Roy—nor a prettier bronc rider or faster roper. But Roy liked to let his spurs out to the town-hole when he got to Chinook. Bartenders, tinhorn gamblers, and dance-hall girls welcomed the tall, good-looking, free-spending son of grizzled, old Sam Gaynor.

Riley Burch had come to Montana about ten years ago and had hired out to the KG outfit, then owned jointly by Bill Kane and Sam Gaynor. Bill Kane had been running the roundup wagon that year. A bronc had kicked him in the head and killed him.

There were older hands in the outfit who had been more or less disgruntled when Sam Gaynor handed the ramrod job to young Riley Burch. Some of them had tried to make it tough on the Texan at first, and Riley had been crowded into a couple of fights. But by the time the last shipment of beef steers went to Chicago that fall, the cowpunchers liked the big soft-spoken wagon boss. Riley Burch could handle men as well as he managed a green bronc. And he was all cowman.

Two years ago the sheriff at Chinook had been killed in a gun fight. Sam Gaynor, with the backing of other big cow outfits, had got Riley elected to the job and he had made good in his quiet way. A few times when tough customers had taken his esay ways for weakness they had been yanked up short. Riley was big and he could handle his fists, and he was fast with a gun when he had to use one.

As Riley rode close, Roy Gaynor noticed that the blue roan horse was gaunt-flanked, streaked with dried sweat. There was a four-days' growth of dust-grimed sandy beard on the sheriff's lean face and his bloodshot blue eyes looked like he hadn't slept lately. Sweat matted thick, straight hair that was the color of new rope. He slapped at a deer fly on his horse's neck with a sweat-marked hat that was pulled out of shape from hard usage.

"A man shore needs his earmuffs weather like this," he grinned. "How's she a-payin', Roy?"

"Just grand," lied Roy Gaynor a little sullenly. "What fetches you out this far away from the poolroom and a tall beer?"

"Still smartin' from that trimmin' I give you playin' bottle pool? You country boys orter know better than to try to win from us city slickers, kid. I sighted the Beef Trust headin' for the ranch. But he's sweatin' his sorrels for nothin'. Old Man Sam ain't contractin' beef now to Mike Harlin with the market a-risin' faster than the Missouri River at flood time."

"You still roddin' the KG outfit, Riley?" Roy Gaynor's tone was a little ugly. The grin on the sheriff's face was slightly forced as he eyed the younger man.

"I was just a-makin' talk, Roy. Nothin' to git het up about. All the interest I got at the KG Ranch right now is a bucket of well water and a bait of real grub. I just throwed sixteen head of stolen horses in the big pasture behind the KG butte. Five of 'em yourn. The others was Long X and Square and two Circle Diamond geldin's. Two of the fellers got away. A 'breed is takin' the third un to Chinook in a wagon."

Riley changed the subject casually. "Never saw the feed better than it is along the river this fall," he remarked. "Grass that touches a man's stirrups. The Doney boys have finished puttin' up hay at Seven Mile and the Rock Crick place and are movin' to the Beaver Crick ranch tomorrow. Gregory Doney needed fifty dollars for grub and another fifty to pay off some of his crew. I give him the money. You or Old Man Sam kin pay me. Though I'd tell you before it slipped my mind."

Riley Burch had just recovered a bunch of stolen horses, had run two horse thieves out of the country and killed one of the gang. Now he was talking about hay crews and winter feed for the cattle. That was his way.

"Take it up with the Old Man," Roy said bluntly. He knew that Riley could tell he had been drinking. Whiskey showed easily on his speech, thickening his tongue. And two drinks gave his eyes a glazed, wild look.

They rode on in silence, their horses kicking up dust. Topping a ridge, they rode down an easy grade toward the cluster of log buildings and corrals that was the KG home ranch.

"Listen, Roy," Riley said finally, "you ain't got into some kind of a jackpot again? Mebbyso I kin help you out of it before Old Man Sam gits—"

"I'll fight my own battles, damn it!" Roy broke in harshly. "Keep your nose out of my business. You've done enough damage around the KG outfit. And understand this, mister. You may be the fair-haired boy with the Old Man but you're just a belly-ache to me with your tin star and your braggin' about shootin' some two-bit horse thief. Buildin' yourself a tough rep and—"

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Roy," the sheriff said coldly. "It's a-flop-pin'. Whiskey raises hell with a man's gizzard on a hot day like this. I'm glad you didn't give me another bad chore to clean up back yonder."

"What the hell you drivin' at?"

RILEY BURCH tapped the leather case that was strapped to his saddle cantle. That case held a pair of army binoculars.

"A man kin see a long ways and sometimes sights some queer things with a pair of field glasses. Cussin' me won't pull you out of the bog, Roy. And you must be in deeper than your hocks when you git bush-whacker notions. Mebbyso it's Old Man Sam I'm tryin' to help. He's all white man."

"And I'm just a no good skunk, is that it?"

"Have your own way about that, Roy."

As they rode on, they saw Mike Harlin go up the three steps and onto the long, wide porch where Old Man Sam Gaynor sat in his rubber-tired wheelchair. Sam Gaynor had been crippled in a stampede five

years ago and his lower limbs were paralyzed.

Harlin was a big, heavy-paunched man who weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds. He bought and sold cattle, horses and mules, owned a saloon and gambling house at Chinook. Behind his rousing laughter and joshing was a cunning and shrewdness that showed in the green eyes that looked out from under bushy iron-gray brows. His thick hair was white. He always carried a case of beer and a jug of whiskey behind the seat of his buckboard.

Mike Harlin was the only man in that part of the cow country who did not own a gun of any kind. His friends claimed it was because he was a brave man. His enemies, and big Mike Harlin had many of them, called it cowardice.

Roy Gaynor saw his father wave the big cattle buyer toward a chair. Neither had offered to shake hands. No friendship was pretended between the grizzled cattleman and the paunchy trader.

Roy Gaynor and Riley Burch watered their horses, unsaddled and turned them loose in the pasture below the big log barn. The sheriff headed for the mess cabin and Roy started doggedly toward the house. But Old Man Sam Gaynor had recognized Riley and called to him.

"Let them wrinkles stay in your belly awhile, Riley. Looks like I need an interpreter to savvy Harlin's talk. Rattle your hocks, Roy. This taller-paunched whiskey peddler claims he's got your name on a cattle option. I never sold him so much as a wind-bellied mammyless calf as long as I've bin in the cow business. He's claimin' five hundred head of four-year-old steers, range delivered at four cents. And the market price is seven cents. Git up here an' tell him he's a damn liar!"

CHAPTER II

FIGHT AT THE KG

IT was enough for a man to have to stand there and take the cussing Old Man Gaynor handed out. But with Riley Burch listening, it was mighty close to unbearable for hotheaded Roy Gaynor.

Riley tried to check Sam Gaynor's stinging blast of words that accused and condemned his son in the same breath. But there was no stopping the fiery-tempered old cowman. Sam Gaynor hated Mike Harlin for some reason neither he nor the big cattle buyer had ever divulged. Now Harlin was here to claim five hundred head of steers in the KG iron. To Old Man Sam Gaynor's way of reckoning, he had been sold out, double-crossed, humiliated by his only son.

Roy stood there, the blood drained from his tanned face. He was cold sober now. His father's vitriolic stream of words was like the drenching sting of a bucket of ice water thrown in his face. The glassy look was gone from his gray eyes, leaving them the color of new slate. Right now Roy Gaynor hated his father almost as much as he hated Riley Burch and the green-eyed, beefy-faced horse trader. He stood there, stiff-lipped, waiting for Sam Gaynor to talk himself dry.

Riley Burch had tried to move away but the old cowman had fetched him back with brittle, crackling profanity.

"Don't try to rabbit on me, damn it! I might gut-shoot that big tub of taller, and I'll need you to haul his carcass off my ranch."

Old Sam Gaynor kept a cedar-handled six-shooter in a shabby old holster rigged to the side of his

wheelchair. He was ornery and hot-tempered enough to use it, too.

But if there was any fear in big Mike Harlin he didn't show a sign of it. He chewed the soggy end of a cold, half-smoked black cigar and sat back comfortably in the heavy armchair. The paper that bore Roy Gaynor's signature was in his hand, a faint, good-humored smile on his clean-shaven red face. He had removed his big white Stetson hat, and now and then he mopped trickles of sweat from his face and forehead with a sodden, white silk handkerchief the size of a dishrag. Sweat soaked his white shirt, staining it darkly where his wide elastic suspenders crossed his thick shoulders.

He seemed to be enjoying the performance. Now and then his eyes left the face of Sam Gaynor to flick an amused glance at Roy and the sheriff.

SAM GAYNOR finished cussing Roy and turned his wrath on Mike Harlin. His drooping gray mustache seemed to bristle. Steel-colored eyes under heavy, ragged gray brows glittered as he shook his bony fist at the cattle buyer. Every word he spoke was an insult that would have made another man try to kill him.

"I've knowed you since you first hit the country. You was ridin' a horse that wore a worked brand and you was driftin' a bunch of stolen horses. You had a long rope, a deck of marked cards and a set of loaded dice. And there was a jug of moonshine whiskey tied on your pack horse. Smallpox had wiped out a family that had located on the head of Wolf Crick. You buried the dead and squatted on that place like a big hoptoad. You never turned a honest dollar in your life, Harlin. The hardest day's work you ever done was cookin' corn mash at a whiskey still. You traded bad likker for land and water rights. You diced and pokered honest men out o' horses and cattle. Fools like this young whelp of mine were your meat. Shootin' is too good for your kind. Hangin' is what you need. Now git off my place before I fill that paunch of yourn full of lead. Git off my ranch!"

"If I have to send a roundup outfit onto your range, Sam, to gather them cattle, you'll have to stand the expense," Harlin said mildly. He heaved his big bulk out of the chair and grinned down at the crippled cowman.

"You'll git your cattle," snapped Sam Gaynor, biting off his words. "Range delivered at your Wolf Crick ranch—two weeks from today. That's the date on that paper you got in your hand. You got scales at your cattle pens. Have the money in cash. No checks. How much does this sheep-brained young whelp owe you altogether?"

"Seven thousand dollars. Roy was in a tight spot and I helped him out as a favor—"

"Why, you crooked—"

Riley Burch stepped between Roy and the big cattle buyer. His voice was cold, deadly calm.

"Don't act the fool, Roy. They hang men for murder. Harlin, you'd better git in that rig of yours and hightail it. You're crowdin' your luck here."

Mike Harlin went down the steps chuckling. He got in his buckboard and drove off. They saw him open a bottle of beer and tilt it to his mouth as the team of sorrels trotted down the road and out of sight.

Sam Gaynor's temper had burned itself out. His gaunt face looked gray in the first shadow of twilight.

There was a beaten, dull look in his eyes as he stared at his son.

"I'd rather you'd robbed a bank. I'd rather you held up a train and got killed a-tryin'." The old man's voice was lifeless. He whirled his wheelchair and propelled it slowly into the house.

Roy went down the steps and headed for the bunkhouse. Riley Burch went to the kitchen at the rear of the long log mess cabin. He got a cup of black coffee and sipped it slowly, his eye on the bunkhouse door. When he saw Roy come out, heading for the barn with rapid, determined strides, the sheriff set down his half-emptied cup and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt. He reached the barn as Roy was throwing his saddle on a fresh horse.

"Where you headed for, Roy?" he asked.

"None of your damn business." Roy Gaynor had taken a big drink from the pint bottle that was shoved in the pocket of his white Angora chaps, and he was again in a fighting mood.

"I've got to make it my business. I know how you feel and I ain't blamin' you much. But killin' Mike Harlin won't help. It'll only mess up things worse. The outlaw trail is a tough un—"

ROY GAYNOR moved swiftly and without giving warning. His long, hard, swinging left caught Riley Burch on the jaw. The sheriff reeled backward, tripped and went down. He rolled over quickly and came up fighting.

They were evenly matched for size. Riley was about fifteen pounds heavier and he was the stronger. But Roy had speed and behind his fists was a white-hot anger that was vicious. His first blow had left the sheriff dizzy. It was Roy Gaynor's fight and he took it with a savage relish.

Time after time Riley Burch went down under the tearing, ripping blows of the hate-inflamed cowpuncher. Roy was showing no mercy. All the jealous hatred that had been gnawing like a cancerous growth at his heart was finding outlet now as he pounded at Riley Burch's blood-smeared, battered face. Roy's own mouth was cut and his nose was bleeding so that his white teeth showed like fangs in a bloody mask of fury. At last, Riley Burch lay on the dirt floor of the barn, an unconscious, dirt-grimed, bloodied heap.

Roy wiped the blood from his torn lips and pulled the cork from his pint bottle. He took a long drink, swallowing the raw whiskey like water. Then he corked the bottle and pulled his saddle cinch tight. He shoved his carbine into the saddle scabbard and rode away from the barn.

The cook had come out of his kitchen, headed for the well with a couple of empty buckets. Roy hailed him.

"Go on down to the barn and wake up the law. He's sleepin'." He rode off before the cook could question him.

There were only hay hands and a couple of bronc riders at the home ranch this time of the year, between the calf and beef roundups. They were lazing in the bunkhouse waiting for the supper bell. Nobody paid any attention to Roy as he rode off alone into the dusk.

He stopped at the creek crossing and washed his hands and face. His shirt was torn and covered with blood and dirt. He'd get a clean one when he reached the horse camp ten miles from the ranch. He had worked some of his bitter anger off on Riley Burch. He had licked hell

out of the man his dad thought was so high and mighty. The taste of victory was as strong as the whiskey he gulped down.

He had aimed, at first, when he went to the barn, to saddle a fresh horse, overtake Mike Harlin and either shoot him or beat him over the head with a gun barrel until that thick-jowled face of his was as raw as so much freshly butchered beef. But he was changing his plans now as he headed for the horse camp. There was no percentage in killing Harlin. Riley Burch had warned him about that. They hung men for murder, and killing a man who didn't own a gun was murder.

There were other ways of getting square with Mike Harlin. The trader could be hurt plenty without a man laying a hand on him. Big Mike Harlin had his vulnerable spots. He loved to beat a man in a dicker or gambling game of any kind, but for all his big hooraw and hand-shaking, he was a hard loser. Beat him out of that deal for the KG cattle and it would hurt worse than a whole bellyful of bullets.

There must be some way a man could outfox Mike Harlin on that deal. Beating the trader on that dicker would show Old Man Sam Gaynor that his son was not the sheep-brained young fool he'd called him. And it would be another victory over Sheriff Riley Burch.

Before Roy Gaynor reached the KG horse camp he had part of his plan figured out in his mind. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner, before Mike Harlin took the notion to ride to the KG home ranch and show Sam Gaynor that damned paper. Roy took the bottle from his chaps pocket and pulled the cork. He lifted the bottle toward the evening star.

"To little Addie Harlin, the only thing besides money that Big Mike Harlin worships." He grinned crookedly and took a drink.

CHAPTER III

MIKE HARLIN'S DAUGHTER

RILEY BURCH washed the blood and dirt from his face and pulled on the best-looking shirt he could find in Roy's room. He looked at his black eye and swollen nose in Roy's shaving mirror and grinned. Then he went into the big front room where Old Man Sam Gaynor sat with a bottle of rye whiskey within easy reach.

"Sam, unless he gits headed on the wrong trail tonight, Roy is goin' to make you almighty proud of him. The way he tore into me was a caution. That long-geared cowboy was all over me like a cyclone. I never seen it rain fists before in my life. He never kicked me once when I went down. Never used a single dirty trick. He fought clean and fair. I tell you, I didn't have a sheepherder's chance at a cattlemen's meetin'. Roy Gaynor handles his dukes like the honky-tonk professor tickles his piano keys." Riley helped himself to a drink.

"For a man that's just takin' a bad whuppin', Riley," Sam Gaynor said dryly, "you're too damn happy. It don't make good sense. You plumb sure there ain't a big knot on your head somewheres?"

"Nope. And I'm not drunk, neither. I like Roy. He's wild and careless about things like money. He gambles too much and he can't hold his likker like a white man should. But if I was in a bad tight I'd rather have him sidin' me than any man I know except his old man. He's got the right warp in him. He's worked out his ornery streak on me.

Five dollars will git you ten, Sam, that Roy will give Mike Harlin the damnedest trimmin' that crook ever had handed him.

"It won't be any gun whippin' or fist whippin' Roy is goin' to dish out, either. Mike Harlin played a low-down trick on the kid when he showed up here with that paper. Roy signed it when he was half-drunk and losin' heavy at Harlin's gamblin' place. I heard all about the game they roped him into. Mike told Roy he'd sell him back the option if Roy won at the poker game he was buckin'. But Harlin's dealers never gave Roy a chance. The game wasn't on the level. They taken Roy to a cleanin'. That was a week ago. When I tried to buy back the option on those cattle, Big Mike Harlin laughed in my face."

"Roy's weaker'n hell," Old Man Sam Gaynor said obstinately. "They make a monkey out o' him in town. Call him a red-hot sport, drink his likker and borrow his money. Behind his back they laugh at him. Roy ner no other man ever outfoxed Mike Harlin in a deal of any kind, Riley. Harlin crooked me once. More'n twenty years ago. Trimmed me bad. But nobody but him and me ever knowed about it. This is the first time I ever mentioned it to ary man. And that's all you'll ever know about it from me.

"Mike Harlin hates me as bad as I hate him. I don't go near his ranch and this is the first time in twenty years he never showed up here. If Roy Gaynor had the pride of a whupped dog he'd never set foot in Harlin's saloon. But he's weak and prideless. They tell me he's still trailin' after Addie Harlin. I'd sooner see him dead than married to Mike Harlin's brat." His sharp eyes glowered at Riley Burch.

"I hope you ain't makin' a fool of yourself over that sorrel-maned wild filly?" he said caustically. "She ain't got you cuttin' fool capers, too, has she?"

Riley grinned, stiff-lipped, his eyes a little hard. He shook his head and rose. "I'm goin' to supper, Sam. Ate my last square meal three days ago."

RILEY BURCH was glad to get away from Old Man Sam's searching eyes. And the subject of Addie Harlin. About the only time he and the Old Man had ever had a real falling-out, Addie had been the couse of it.

Sam had told Riley he couldn't put much stock in a man who made a fool of himself over that sorrel-maned, speckle-faced Harlin heifer. Any girl that wore man's pants and rolled cigarettes and played poker and traipsed around alone all over the country was no kind of a woman for any man in his right mind. He colored his description of Mike Harlin's daughter with profanity until Riley told him that his crippled legs were all that kept him from getting the worst fist whipping a man ever got.

Later they had patched up the quarrel, but the subject was still like a fire that has been only partly covered with gray ashes and dirt, and a stiff wind was all that was needed to blow off the banking and fan the still smoldering coals into quick, hot flame.

Riley Burch thought a lot of Addie Harlin. So did most of the cowpunchers who had ever met her, though there was nothing beautiful about the girl except her thick, curly red hair that she had made the barber at Chinook cut to the level of her square little chin.

It wouldn't be long until every woman in the country was wearing

her hair bobbed, but right now Addie Harlin was the only girl in the cow country with short hair and it added fuel to the fire of malicious gossip about her. But even cut short like that, it was thick and curly and beautiful. And her deep-set gray-green eyes, fringed by long, thick black lashes, were more than beautiful. They had intelligence, humor, tolerance and courage.

Addie Harlin's mother had died when her daughter was six years old. The youngster had grown up like some wild flower that had never had much care or attention paid it. She was keeping house for her father by the time she was ready for high school. She had learned how to play, cook a meal and make her own clothes which she designed herself. She had learned card dealing from the gamblers who worked for Mike Harlin. She learned how to roll cigarettes when a cowpuncher at the ranch got both his hands frozen badly, and she fed him and shaved him and rolled his smokes for him.

Addie savvied cattle and horses and could make a hand on the roundup or around the Wolf Creek ranch. And when she wanted to go somewhere she saddled a horse and pulled out. Addie Harlin had wild, untamed ways, but she was as capable as a man in a lot of respects. More capable than most ranch women when it came to actual cowpuncher savvy.

But Addie was not beautiful, or even pretty. Her nose was too short, her mouth too large, her chin a trifle too firm. There were tiny sun wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and her tanned face was freckled. And when she put on a dress to go to a dance there was the line between her tanned face and throat and the milk-white skin of her lower neck and shoulders, so that she looked a little out of place among the white-skinned town girls. But she was the best dancer in Chinook.

MIKE HARLIN said he didn't give a damn who Addie married, so long as she didn't get hooked to Roy Gaynor. She had horses and cattle in her own Diamond A iron, and money in the bank. She didn't need to marry any man for money. All Mike cared about was her happiness. He'd kill any man that ever hurt her, even if he had to borrow a gun to do the job. And the only man he barred was the son of Sam Gaynor. He said it gave him an awful pain in the belly whenever he saw Roy Gaynor dance with Addie. And Roy could look as slick on a dance floor as he did fanning a bronc down Chinook's main street.

Of all the men that courted Addie, Harlin favored Riley Burch a little. Riley was a level-headed young feller. And Mike could use a sheriff in the family.

"There's not enough bronc in Riley, Mike," Addie told her father when he hinted that the big lawman would make a mighty good husband for some red-headed gal he had in mind.

"He don't git howlin' drunk and he ain't a sucker for the dealers and he don't buy wine for the honky-tonk stage gals, if that's what you mean," said Mike. "But he's halter-broke and bridle-wise and he don't spook. You wouldn't be wastin' your time waitin' for him to show up of a night. And you wouldn't have to put in the mornin' wrappin' cold wet towels around his head and mixin' him pick-me-ups. Up till now I always had a notion that any girl wanted a steady-goin' man for a lifetime teammate."

"Maybe I'm not 'any girl,' Mike,"

Addie said flippantly. "I like plenty of spice in my daily grub."

"Then go find yourself a Mexican." Mike chuckled at his own joke and let the subject drop. He had yet to win his first argument with his daughter, Addie.

When Riley Burch finally got his nerve bolstered up enough to ask Addie Harlin to marry him, she had told him he was in the big brother class.

"You spent so much time riding herd on Roy Gaynor, Riley, that you've got that big-brother look in your eye. Gosh, I don't want a protector. I couldn't stand for any man riding close-herd on me. I'd have you gray-haired in a year. One evening you'd come home and find a note on the kitchen table instead of a hot supper. Let me pick you out a nice girl that's plumb gentle and can play the organ and sing 'Home, Sweet Home' of a long winter evening. It's no dice for you and me, sheriff." She called him "sheriff" when she wanted to tease him.

That's the way things stood between Riley and Addie Harlin. And until she changed her ways, which was a long, long time distant if he knew anything about human nature, that was the way things would remain between them. But they were mighty good friends.

Addie had a habit of coming to Riley with her confidences. He knew her better than her own father had ever known her, and he was the only man who had ever seen Addie cry. She had found her mother's diary in an old tin trunk and something that she had read in it had torn the girl's heart.

Addie had never told Riley what it was she had read. But she had lain face downward on the bunk in Riley's town cabin, and for an hour she had been racked by a terrible sobbing that left her white and ill. She had asked him to let her stay there the rest of the night because she could not go back to her father's house yet. So Riley had fed her hot soup and given her his bunk while he spread his bedroll on the floor in the next room. In the morning he was going on a three-day trip into the badlands to check up on some beef butchering the 'breeds had been doing. Addie made him let her go along with him. Mike Harlin had helped throw the diamond hitch that roped the girl's bed on her pack horse.

"She's actin' do-cile enough, Riley, to holler quits if you'd stop by the circuit rider preacher's place on Big Warm Crick."

Big Mike Harlin had been more right about his daughter than he or Riley ever guessed. But Riley wasn't taking any sort of advantage of her like that. They didn't go near the preacher's ranch.

The third night they camped out together Addie was her old self once more. She was as gay and carefree as ever when they got back to Chinook. The gossips had plenty of material to work on, but the more they talked the brighter Addie Harlin's eyes twinkled. And even the worst of the scandalmongers knew they had no foundation for any of their talk. It took the zest out of them when their husbands only laughed at their wild statements.

CHAPTER IV

STRICTLY BUSINESS

THE next day Roy Gaynor found Addie Harlin halter-breaking some colts at the Wolf Creek ranch. She looked at his cut, swollen lip and discolored eye and laughed.

"You needn't get comical, carrot

top," he grinned back at her, "you should see the other feller."

"Until I do, skinny, I'm still laughin' at you. What fetches the KG ramrod across the deadline between them thar two ranges? You come a-feudin'? I'll git my shootin' irons and settle this war between the blood-drinkin' Gaynors and the raw meat-eatin' Harlins."

"Big Mike cold-decked me," Roy told her.

"Don't come cry-babyin' to me, slim gent. You're free, white and twenty-one, and if you've lost your little stack of chips, take it smilin' as if you liked it. I can't stand a whiner."

Roy scowled. "Cut it out, freckles. I've stood about all the hard names my system will hold. The Old Man used up his whole vocabulary and didn't overlook a bet. Anything you can add to it will be like takin' soda water after a gallon of corn likker. But just the same, lay off. The last person that got free with advice wound up on the barn floor with his head under 'im."

"Advice, eh? That wouldn't have been the sheriff puttin' on his big brother act?"

"You used up the one guess you had comin'. I let the other un make a clean getaway."

"That," smiled Addie, "would be Mike. But don't come warblin' your tale of woe here. My ears are full of corral dust. And I'm a busy gal. They tell me the little brown-eyed schoolmarm over on Schoolhouse Coulee lends a mighty sympathetic ear. Now lope along before Mike shows up and gives you the evil eye for tryin' to make up to his daughter."

"Big Mike had better not cut my sign right now," said Roy flatly. "Not after pullin' a welsher trick like he did yesterday."

"Mike Harlin never welshed in his life!" Addie's green eyes flashed in the morning sunlight.

"He drove out to the ranch an' talked to the Old Man. Do you think I'm makin' this up out of my head? The Old Man gave me a cussin' I wouldn't have taken from any other hombre on earth!"

"If he'd quit usin' a spade bit on you and try a hackamore for once—" Addie broke off, and looked at him questioningly. "But where do I figure to take chips in your game, cowhand?"

"Turn those colts over to your bronc peeler. Throw your tarp and soogans on a bed horse. We're goin' on a week's trip."

"What is this, a proposal?"

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the last female on a desert island and—"

"We've gone into all that before. The last time I slapped your face I sprained my wrist. If you need somebody to hold your hand and slap raw beef on that black eye, the schoolmarm—"

"You went with Riley Burch and you—"

"There's more difference between you and Riley Burch than there is between Satan and Saint Michael."

"So Riley's a saint now?"

"He licked the tar out of the devil, anyhow."

"Riley? When?"

"Oh, lope along, you long-geared Romeo. I've got some broncs to play with."

"But this is strictly business, freckles. We'll stay at a different ranch every night. If I make a pass at you, you can open me up with a butcher knife. And if you'll help me swing this deal, I'll change my mind and sell you a few head of those two-year-old Morgan-bred colts you've bin pesterin' me about."

"It would be too bad," Addie said, "if Big Mike overhauled us and hung you to a cottonwood limb."

"Ten head? And I pick 'em?"

"You drive a tougher bargain than Mike ever did. You've got me over a barrel. Ten head, horse thief. You pick 'em. Now throw your bed on a pack horse. We're makin' fifty mile rides every day and I cut you in on half the profits when the deal is sewed in the sack."

"Smells like a skunk in the woodpile."

"It's Big Mike," grinned Roy.

"Or Old Man Sam."

"We'll have 'em both drinkin' out of the same bottle if we git the job done right," Roy told her.

"Why didn't you spring that to start with? That's one line of argument that holds all the aces in the

deck. Give me half an hour to get ready."

IT was not quite half an hour later when they left the Wolf Creek ranch. Each led a bed horse. Roy had borrowed blankets and a tarp from one of the cowpunchers at the KG horse camp.

"If Mike Harlin shows up," Roy told the barn man, "tell him that me'n Addie have eloped. We're headed now for the preacher's ranch and gone on a pack-trip honeymoon."

"What was it you told the barn man?" asked Addie when Roy caught up with her. They had started off together, then Roy told her he had left his chaps at the barn. He had forgotten them purposely. When he caught up with her he had the white angora chaps hanging from his saddlehorn because the day was too hot to wear them.

"I told him that if it wasn't for your looks and chili pepper disposition you'd make some man a good wife."

"I hope you didn't try to get humorous and hand him some sweet little fairy tale about this trip. That old waddy does more cackling than all the setting hens at Chinook put together. I'd hate to have this trip spoiled by Big Mike overhauling us and hanging you to a cottonwood limb. But I left a note for him so that spoils any batter you stirred up. Old Sid will give him the note."

Roy didn't tell her that he'd seen the sealed envelope with Mike Harlin's name on it lying on top of the box where Sid kept currycombs and brushes and other stuff. The note was now in the pocket of the white angora chaps. It was a low-down trick and he felt ashamed of it. But when a man sat in a game with Mike Harlin he had to play whatever tricks came into his hand.

"I'd give my chances of ridin' through the big gates of heaven," Roy told Addie as they rode along side by side, "if we were headed for the preacher's ranch right now."

"Quit it, Roy. We've battled that out too many times. When I marry it'll be a man, not a wild bronc that still has burrs in his mane and tail. This is a business trip."

She reached over, lifted his sack of tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette. She lit it and handed it to him.

"Now tell me about the fight you had with Riley."

CHAPTER V

COW-COUNTRY GOSSIP

WILD rumors swept that part of the cow country with the speed of a prairie fire fanned by a forty-mile wind. Roy Gaynor and Addie Harlin had ridden over the skyline together, and the gossips at Chinook, male and female, were quick to take advantage of it.

Big Mike Harlin had fetched old Sid, the barn man at his Wolf Creek ranch, to town. Sid had told him he had to come to Chinook to get measured for a set of store teeth. Whiskey had set Sid's tongue a-wagging and before the garrulous old barn man had been in town an hour the story about Roy running off with Addie to get married had traveled back and forth across town half a dozen times.

Like the proverbial snowball rolling downhill, the tale grew in size. Each scandalmonger added his or her bit to the story told by old Sid. By the time Sid's ill-fitting new upper and lower plates were clicking like castanets and he was garnishing his first-told version with more

interesting details that were products of a whiskey-warmed imagination, the story that concerned Roy Gaynor and Addie Harlin was badly distorted into an ugly shape.

Mike Harlin slapped old Sid's mouth shut and sent him back out to the Wolf Creek ranch. Time had been when Mike Harlin could, with his two hands, clean out a saloon full of fighting men. He said that when he overtook Roy Gaynor he was going to tear that tall cowboy apart and throw the chunks to the coyotes. He climbed in his yellow buckboard and left Chinook in a swirling cloud of dust.

Riley Burch did what he could toward discounting old Sid's wild tale. When any one made any remarks to him, he repeated what he had told Big Mike Harlin.

"If Addie rode away with Roy, she went of her own accord and plumb willing. If they went somewheres to git married, that's their own business and none of ours. They're both free, white and twenty-one. Addie Harlin never yet did anything she didn't want to do. Elopin' certainly ain't a crime here in Montana. I wouldn't sweat a horse tryin' to head 'em off."

Riley Burch told his chief deputy to handle things at the office. He himself had a two-weeks' vacation coming to him, and he was taking it. He saddled the horse Sam Gaynor had given him when he took the sheriff job and rode out to the KG Ranch.

THE story about Roy and Addie reached Sam Gaynor ahead of the sheriff's arrival at the ranch. Old Man Sam was fit to be tied, the cook told Riley.

Gaynor was propelling his wheelchair up and down the long porch, stopping now and then to mix himself a cold toddy of whiskey and water. The bottle and water pitcher were on a table near the front steps of the porch.

"Fetch me pen and ink and paper, Riley!" Sam barked at him. "I'm makin' me a new will. I'm cuttin' that young whelp off at the pockets. Leavin' him a hundred dollars. The rest of the KG outfit goes to you, lock, stock an' barrel. No arguments. I'll learn that long-geared young coyote! Quittin' his crippled ol' daddy in a tight!"

"If Roy's done anything wrong, Sam, you and Mike Harlin ribbed him into it," Riley declared. "If Addie married him, he's the luckiest cowhand in Montana. If he done it to spite Big Mike, he shore got the job done. You got the rubber tires on that wheelchair a-smokin' and Mike Harlin's whuppin' that team of his down the hind laigs. Like as not, Roy and Addie are gittin' a big laugh out of it. If there's ary wrong streak in either of 'em, I've never seen it, Sam. You and Mike Harlin are too busy right now with your dirt-pawin' and bellerin' to git the point of the joke, that's all."

"Keep on runnin' off at the head, young feller, and you're losin' yourself this KG outfit. I'll leave it to . . . to— Hell, I'll give it to the Injuns!"

"It'll be a big day for the Injuns, Sam," the sheriff said dryly. "Mike Harlin's doin' likewise with his estate."

Riley helped himself to a drink and settled down comfortably in a chair, pulling out tobacco and papers.

"That option Mike Harlin holds calls for five hundred head of four-year-old steers, Sam. I'll have a roundup outfit workin' the range tomorrow. Like as not, Roy will be

showin' up in day or two. But I got two weeks' vacation comin' to me and I'm takin' it. I'll ramrod your outfit till Roy shows up to take the job off my hands."

"You're so stuck on Addie Harlin," snorted Sam Gaynor, "that you're plumb green around the gills. Why don't you overhaul 'em and take her away from that young coyote?"

"You don't know Addie like I do, Sam. And the last time I tried to talk Roy out of anything he rocked me to sleep with his dukes. They've got my blessin'." Riley grinned faintly and rubbed his cheek which was still swollen and discolored.

Riley had hired a crew of cowpunchers in town. The roundup outfit pulled away from the KG home ranch the following day. Mess wagon, bed wagon, remuda. Old Man Sam Gaynor watched them until they were lost to sight in the distance.

The grizzled old cowman's heart was badly brusied, despite his bluster and truculence. During the days that followed he sat out on the long porch and watched the skyline for a sign of his son. He sent a man to Chinook every day to fetch back any news of Roy and Addie Harlin.

But there was no news of the missing couple. They had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened up and swallowed them. Old Sam tried to hope that his son had not actually coyoted on him. Now that Roy was gone he was beginning to realize a lot of things that he had let himself be blinded about. The ranch didn't run smoothly when Roy was away. The boy, for all his wild ways, was a top-hand ranch boss.

And Old Man Sam Gaynor was downright lonesome. He missed Roy around the place. He had to admit that he had been too harsh and stern with the boy. He had forgotten that, in his younger days, he himself had been mighty wild and headstrong. He wouldn't give two big hoots for a son who didn't know how to paint a cow town red.

SAM GAYNOR'S man brought home word that Big Mike Harlin was back in town after nearly two weeks. Big Mike had lost weight, the man said, and looked older. He had quit hoorawing and joshing and was drinking more than his old average of a quart a day. His red face was covered with a twelve-days' growth of white beard and his shoulders sagged like he was worn out and licked.

Riley Burch rode to Chinook. He found Big Mike Harlin in the barber chair getting shaved.

"Show up at the Wolf Crick ranch, Mike," Riley told him. "I've got a herd gathered for you to trim. Five hundred head of four-year-old KG steers ready to git weighed out. Prime steers. Beef steers are fetchin' seven and a half cents on the market right now an' you git 'em for four cents. Old Man Sam shore is takin' a bad losin'."

"Losin'?" Big Mike Harlin reared up in the barber chair, his bloodshot eyes glittering from behind a mask of white lather. "What the hell has Sam Gaynor lost but a few head of cattle and a no-account son? I've lost the finest little girl in the world!"

"The cattle will be at the Wolf Crick ranch tomorrow mornin' at sunrise," said Riley. "You started this, Mike. It's up to you to be there at the finish. You didn't lose Addie. You sold her for five hundred head of KG steers. Be there to take delivery on 'em."

Riley Burch turned and walked out of the barber shop, his spurs

jingling. He got on his horse and rode to the KG. It was long past midnight when he got to the home ranch. A light showed in Old Man Sam Gaynor's bedroom. There were the saddles of a dozen KG cowpunchers at the barn.

Riley strode into the bunkhouse and lit a candle. He scowled at the sleepy-eyed cowpunchers who sat up in their bunks when he came in.

"I left you men holdin' the KG herd!" he said harshly. "What the hell—"

"Roy Gaynor sent us to the ranch, Riley," one man said. "He showed up about first guard time and made us turn the herd loose. Made us break camp and come on to the home ranch. The mess wagon and bed wagon is on the way here. The remuda is in the horse pasture behind the butte. I put up an argument, Riley, and Roy knocked me down. Two-three other boys started to take 'er up for me and he knocked 'em down and told us all to git fer home. Said that he was still roddin' the KG outfit and we'd take his orders or draw our time."

"Was he drunk?"

"Cold sober. And grinnin' like a circus clown. Mebby he's gone locoed. He kep' grinnin' all the time he was swingin' at us boys."

"Was he alone?"

"Plumb alone, Riley. And grinnin' wide. He said to tell you he had a bait of crow meat he was makin' Mike Harlin and Old Man Sam eat without salt. I told him you'd gone to Chinook to tell Big Mike the cattle was ready for delivery. He's gone locoed, Riley!"

Riley grinned faintly. He went on to the main house. Old Man Sam was sitting up in bed, a battle of whiskey and a pitcher of water on the table alongside his bed.

"It's about time you showed up! What in hell's gone wrong? What's got into that young coyote? I tell yuh, Riley, it's time you pinned on that badge of yourn and jailed that damn—"

"Keep your nightshirt on, Sam. I don't know what's bin goin' on or what's come over Roy. But if I was you I'd save that cussin'. I'm saddlin' a fresh horse and pullin' out now for the Wolf Crick ranch. Mebbyso if you'd git one of the boys to drive over there with you in your buggy, you'd see somethin'. The road's in good shape and if you drive slow, the joltin' won't hurt you half as bad as layin' here frettin' and stewin' and guzzlin' likker."

Sam Gaynor had calmed down. He nodded. "Have 'em hook my team to the top buggy, Riley. Mike Harlin had better not git in my way, neither. I'll shoot the fat gizzard out o' his paunch!"

Riley Burch took his sheriff's badge from his pocket and pinned it to his shirt.

"Looks like my vacation's over. You ain't shootin' nobody, Sam. If you and Mike Harlin had a lick of sense between you, you'd bury the war tomahawk and smoke the peace pipe. I've got a notion that somehow Roy and Addie have put one over on you both. See you at Wolf Crick ranch."

CHAPTER VI

PAYOFF IN WOLF BAIT

THE sun was rising in a crimson-streaked sky when Riley Burch topped the ridge above the Wolf Creek place. He saw a heavy dust cloud below at the corrals and the bawling of cattle came up through the yellow shroud. Through the dust Riley could make out the cattle that were being corralled by half a dozen riders. He

rode down the slope as the drags of the cattle were going into the big pole corrals.

Perched on the ridge pole that spanned the tops of the two tall gate poles, Riley saw Roy Gaynor and Addie Harlin. Each had a tally book and stubby pencil.

"Five hundred!" called Addie.

"Five hundred!" echoed Roy Gaynor.

They grinned down at Riley Burch as a cowpuncher leaned from his saddle and swung the wide pole gate shut.

"Who you reppin' for, Riley?" Roy called down to him. "Big Mike Harlin or Old Man Sam Gaynor?"

"I'm representin' neither or both," Riley grinned faintly as they climbed down from their high perch, one on either side of the gate. "I got my law badge shined up this mornin'. Sam Gaynor ain't more than a few miles behind me. Mike Harlin should be here with a sackful of pay-off money. For two weeks they've both bin on the prod and I figgered the law had better be on hand when this little family gatherin' took place. Unofficially, I want to congratulate you two little lovebirds. You got the job done. Sam Gaynor and Mike Harlin just naturally have to hand you their fatherly blessin'—"

"Pull yourself up short," smiled Addie. "Your wedding bells are all out of tune. If Roy Gaynor was—"

"The last man on earth," grinned Roy, "she wouldn't even look his way. It goes double. Of all the ornery humans I ever met, Mike Harlin's spoiled brat takes the prize. But she's a cowhand, mister. We worked short-handed and stood guard four hours every night. I've held herds in my time, but this five hundred head of culls made up the orneriest herd that ever walk-bawled, sulked, stampeded and balked.

"Climb the corral, feller, and take a look at 'em. All fresh branded in the KG iron. All four-year-olds steers. The bulk of 'em are runty little dogie stuff that we picked up on the far side of the Missouri. Got 'em from the Lazy S. The owner was so glad to git rid of 'em that he loaned us cowboys to help gather 'em and drive 'em off his range. Three hundred and seventy-five head of them runty li'l' ol' Mexican dogies that's all horns and tail. Ten dollar a head would be more than they're worth.

"The rest of the herd is lump jaws, remnants from other outfits that they all but paid us to take. The sorriest herd, Riley, that ever was gathered. And we put 'em all in the KG iron for Big Mike. The option calls for five hundred head of four-year-old steers in the KG iron. Here they are. And it's almost larceny to ask a man to take 'em as a gift. Where's Big Mike and his sackful of cash money?"

RILEY BURCH rode his horse alongside the corral. His grin became a chuckle. Roy Gaynor was not exaggerating. They were the sorriest-looking bunch of cattle he had ever seen in his life. Mike Harlin would be paying four cents a pound for a lot of hide and bones. The cattle were not worth anything. But they'd be eating grass on the Harlin range. Grass that should be fattening good, sound stock.

Riley swung from his horse and sat alongside Addie Harlin on the corral. Roy grinned at them and went toward the well to get a drink of water.

"Now everybody," began Riley, "thinks you and Roy—"

"Everybody," Addie smiled at him mockingly, "is wrong as usual about

Big Mike's wild brat. If ever I had any romantic notions about Roy Gaynor, I haven't now. The only thing we agree on is that we know how to handle a bunch of ornery cattle. It was a business deal from the start, Riley. We went straight to the Lazy S Ranch from here. It took two weeks of the hardest, toughest cowpunching you ever saw to gather and hold those steers.

"We've slept with our boots on and eaten in the saddle. Roy worked us harder like a Simon Legree. And he worked himself twice as hard as he worked his crew. I don't know when he slept. He gave his tarp and blankets to the Lazy B cowboys.

"They cussed him and fought him, Riley. He's had to whip every man in the outfit at one time or another. But they stuck. And they'll tell you he's the toughest, best ramrod they ever worked for. He's payin' 'em double wages, and I'm getting a bunch of KG colts I've always wanted. All I want right now is a hot bath, a decent meal and a week's sleep."

A rapidly approaching cloud of dust along the wagon road now took on real meaning. Out of it came Old Man Sam Gaynor's team of fast trotting blacks. The old cowman was driving. Besides him on the buggy seat was a huge, motionless, blood-smeared shape.

The blowing, sweat-dripping, big blacks halted. Old Man Sam Gaynor's face was gray, grim-lipped. He had holding the lines with one hand, supporting the unconscious, form of Big Mike Harlin with his other arm.

"Quit a-gawkin', Riley," snapped the old cowman. "Git 'im into the house. He's shot."

"You—" Riley began.

"I found him layin' alongside the road, bleedin' like a stuck hawg. He got bushwhacked along the road and robbed of the money he was fetchin' to pay for them steers. I had the hell of a job gittin' him loaded in the buggy. He's a hefty load fer an ol' cripple to handle alone. I got the bullet hole in him plugged so's he ain't bleedin'. Handle 'im easy, boys."

MIKE HARLIN'S eyes slowly opened. He saw Addie with her arms supporting his head and a grin spread across his blood-spattered face. She was white as chalk, but her smile was brave.

"Who did it, Mike?"

"A couple of double-crossin' renegades I had workin' for me. I had it comin'. I knew they were tough. They got away from Riley a few weeks ago. He killed their pardner down on the Missouri River. They came to me with a proposition and I was drunk enough to hire 'em. I was feelin' ornery to'rds Riley and Sam Gaynor. Figgered there might be range trouble and I'd need tough hands. They double-crossed me. Shot me and left me for dead. But I'm a long ways from dead, thanks to Sam Gaynor. He come along.

"The bullet hole is in my shoulder. I was drivin' a team of broncs. They run away an' turned the buckboard over. I landed on my head and got knocked cold. When I come to, Sam Gaynor is tryin' to lift me into his buggy. He's cussin' and sweatin' and damned if he ain't standin' on his crippled laigs. Kinda wabbly, like a drunk man, but he's walkin' on his two laigs. Wasn't you, Sam?"

"Somethin' in my spine kinda snapped when I leaned from the buggy. Felt shootin' pains plumb into my toes. First time in years there's bin ary feelin' in them dead laigs of mine."

Old Man Sam Gaynor's puckered

eyes fastened on his son. He pointed to the cattle in the corrals.

"Where'd them cattle come from? Damnedest-lookin' bunch of stock I ever laid eyes on."

"They're mostly that dogie Mexican stuff the Lazy S trailed up here for a sort of experiment," Roy told him. "They all but paid me to round 'em up and git 'em off the Lazy S range. I delivered 'em here to Addie Harlin. She's reppin' for Big Mike and took delivery."

"Are you two young uns marrieds?"

"Not on your life!" said Roy quickly.

"Not if he was the last man on earth!" Addie supplemented Roy's heated denial.

"Kin you beat that for contrariness, Mike?" growled Sam Gaynor.

"Looks like we got a little previous back yonder, Sam, when we shook hands on it and took our first drink together in twenty years."

Then Big Mike Harlin pointed to the long-horned steers in the corral. "Wolf bait." There was a deep chuckle in his voice.

"Five hundred head of four-year-old steers, Mike," Roy grinned. "All in the KG iron. It was like this," he continued. "I talked Addie into it. Then, the first night out, on our way to the Lazy S Ranch, she told me about somethin' she'd read in a diary her mother had kept. Somethin' that I reckon you both remember and ain't any too proud about."

Roy didn't look at his father as he went on, "Sam Gaynor's wife had died and left him with a small son to look after. So he started courting a young schoolteacher in Chinook. Mike Harlin wanted a wife to keep house for him. He was Sam Gaynor's rival for the schoolmarm's hand.

"It was an even race. She liked 'em both. And she couldn't decide which one of the pair she wanted to marry. She told 'em both to wait till she could make up her mind.

BUT Mike Harlin and Sam Gaynor weren't the kind to wait. Both were men who liked to gamble. So they played a game of poker to see which one would drop out of the race.

"Sam Gaynor lost. He went down to Texas and when he came back six months later with a trail herd, Mike Harlin had married the little Chinook schoolmarm.

"Sam Gaynor congratulated the bride and groom. That night in town Mike Harlin got a few drinks too many and told Sam Gaynor that he had won the schoolmarm with a deck of marked cards. They put on the worst fist fight Chinook ever saw. And that began the enmity between Sam Gaynor and Mike Harlin. Years afterward, Mike Harlin told his wife about that poker game. That was the only quarrel in their married life.

"There's no discountin' the fact that they both loved her. But there was somethin' about that poker game that was like stickin' a knife in the heart of Mike Harlin's wife. Mike was the finest husband any woman ever had. He worshiped her and their baby girl. But the hurt was there and the scar stayed on her heart.

"That's why Addie didn't come back here or send back word that she was at the Lazy S Ranch. We figured it was time you both got paid off for that poker game."

"And the five hundred head of wolf-bait dogie steers," smiled Addie, her arms holding her father, "they're just proof that Roy Gaynor is the only man who ever beat Big Mike Harlin on a cattle deal."

"The first time," chuckled Big Mike Harlin, "I ever got trimmed and liked it."

"And that," grinned Old Man Sam Gaynor, "goes double."

Big Mike was weak from the loss of blood. Sam Gaynor's legs were a little wabbly. Addie and Roy helped them into the house. Addie had a nurse's training in first aid work. She started working on the two men while one of the Lazy S men was sent to town for a doctor.

Sheriff Riley Burch saddled a fresh horse and shoved a carbine in his saddle scabbard. Roy came from the house as Riley was mounting.

"Hold on a minute, Riley. You've got to count me in on this."

Their eyes met and held in a steady gaze. Roy Gaynor had changed in the past two weeks. All the petty hatred and jealousy was gone from his eyes. He was asking Riley Burch for this one chance to prove his friendship.

"I wouldn't want a better man to side me in a tight, Roy. I'm proud to have you along," Riley said earnestly. "An' now's the time I reckon I've got to let down *my* hair and do some talkin'."

CHAPTER VII

RENEGADE CLEANUP

BUT Riley didn't do any talking until he and Roy had reached the strip of badlands that were called Renegade Basin. It was a deep box canyon, and there was only one trail that led down into it.

"The two men we're after," began Riley, "are Clem Porter and Tom Condron. They're both killers. They're the last of the old Chick Salter gang. It was Chick that I killed. I warned 'em when I took the sheriff job that if they ever came to Montana, I'd take in after 'em. They ranged in New Mexico, mostly. Then drifted north.

"I used to be one of the gang. I might still be ridin' the outlaw trail with 'em if it hadn't bin for Sam Gaynor. Sam and some KG cowpunchers rode up on us when we were hazin' a bunch of stolen horses across the lower end of his range. Clem Porter, Tom Condron, and Chick Salter coyoted, leavin' me and a boy we called Sandy to do the fightin'. Sandy got killed. I got shot up some. I was sentenced to the pen. Sam Gaynor got me out after five years and gave me a job with the KG outfit. Now I reckon you savvy why I'd go through hell and back for Old Man Sam."

"And that's why you put up with all the ornery things I did to you," said Roy.

"Partly that. Partly because I just couldn't hate you. It did look like I was tryin' to play the fair-haired boy with the Old Man, I reckon. But he had gotten me out of prison and I was tryin' to pay him back for what he'd done.

"I saw Old Man Sam Gaynor's only son makin' a damned fool out of himself. Throwin' Sam's money away to tinhorn gamblers and buyin' drinks for a pack of barroom bums that slapped you on the back and told you what a hot sport you was, and how this Riley Burch was tryin' to knife you in the back.

"I tried to head you off from that pack of two-legged leeches that was borrowin' money from you and never payin' you back. And when I got the sheriff job I rounded up that pack of moochers and tinhorn gamblers and run 'em out of Chinook. You called me some mighty hard names behind my back and to my face. I took it because you was the son of Old Man Sam Gaynor.

"Even Addie Harlin called me a long-haired preacher and poked fun at me for bein' so hidebound. She didn't know that five years in the pen will saw a man's horns off. Nobody but Sam Gaynor knew that I'd bin in Deer Lodge Prison. I'd promised Sam to keep it a secret and I have, up till right now." Riley's voice was bitter. "I let you and Addie Harlin and Big Mike and anybody else that thought the same way call me a sanctimonious son that rode close herd on Roy Gaynor."

Roy's face had colored a dull, angry red and there was a white tightness to his mouth. He was having a hard time controlling his hot temper under Riley's lashing voice.

"Ever hear of the Pecos Kid?" Riley demanded.

Roy Gaynor nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The name of the Pecos Kid conjured up the vivid stories he had heard of the youngest and wildest of the old Chick Salter gang. Men still told stories of the headlong, reckless, wild escapades of the young Texas outlaw.

"I rode with the Chick Salter gang," said Riley Burch, his voice flat-toned, "under that name!"

RILEY reined up and pointed into the black maw of a big box canyon below. It was bleak and forbidding.

"Yonder's the Renegade Basin. Down yonder is where I hope to cut the sign of the two blackleg sons that left the Pecos Kid and Sandy in a tight while they made a clean getaway. Now, git off your horse." Riley Burch reined his horse off the trail and dismounted. Roy did likewise, a puzzled scowl knitting his brows.

"Now put up your dukes," ordered Riley Burch. "I've bin waitin' a long time for this little moment, mister. You licked me once but you can't do it again. You've got a whuppin' comin' and I'm goin' to hand it to you with both mitts."

Riley's open-handed slap caught Roy across the mouth. The sheriff's attack was cold, savage. Roy fought back with a hot-tempered fury. He had thrashed Riley Burch once, but this time he had no defense against the cold-blooded ferocity of the bigger, cooler-headed man. It was the outlaw they had called the Pecos Kid who was fighting tonight. And behind every blow was the pent-up rancor that had gnawed at the heart of the ex-convict.

Riley's eyes were slits of blue ice. There was a twisted grin on his mouth as he knocked Roy Gaynor down. Roy kept scrambling to his feet. Riley would flatten him, beat him to his knees.

The last time Roy got to his feet, Riley Burch put every ounce of strength he had into the swing of his fist. Roy lay motionless on the ground knocked out cold. Riley grinned down at the limp form. Then he carried it in behind the brush. He wiped the blood from Roy's battered nose and mouth and from his own face. The hardness was gone from his eyes and he grinned widely. He led Roy's horse over behind a thick patch of scrub pines, tying it by the bridle reins.

"It'll be all over when you come awake, Roy," he said softly. "I owe it to Old Man Sam and Addie. This is a strictly one-man job, feller."

Riley Burch mounted his horse and rode on. He halted at the top of the steep trail that led down into Renegade Basin. Cupping his hands to his mouth he gave a perfect imitation of a hoot-owl's call.

From the black shadows below came the answer. Riley rode down the trail with his six-shooter in his

hand. He was lost to sight in the shadows below. The only sound that broke the silence of the badlands moonlight and black shadows was the noise made by his horse's shod hoofs descending the trail into the outlaw hideaway.

But other sounds filtered into Roy Gaynor's ears as he stirred and blinked his eyes. His head was splitting with pain and he felt dizzy when he got to his feet. He stood there, gripping his holstered gun, shaking his head to clear his senses, wiping blood from his face.

He heard the clatter of shod hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, men's voices. He eased his six-shooter from its holster and crouched in the black shadows. He could make out the words that came from a short distance away. Then he saw two riders silhouetted against the moonlit sky. They reined up at the top of the trail that led into the Renegade Basin. Their words were clearly audible.

"I tell you, Clem, I don't like the idee of goin' down there. We got a South America stake tied in our slickers. Our horses is fresh enough to take us acrost the river. We got Big Mike and we got his bankroll. We stuck up his gamblin' joint and had to shoot our way out with the sack of money we got there. This country ain't safe. Them gents camped in the Basin ain't too friendly. Our trail is hot. To hell with goin' down there."

"I got a bullet in my thigh that's givin' me hell, Condron," the second man complained. "I got to hole up somewheres and git it dug out o' my hide. We'll only lose an hour, mebby. I'll git this laig doctored and we'll hightail it before ary posse gits on our trail. We're safe down in Renegade Basin. Safe as if we was in jail."

"With ropes around our necks and the trapdoor under our feet," his partner snarled. "I'll doctor that laig of yourn when we cross the river and—"

"Reach for the stars!" ordered Roy, his voice harsh, brittle.

THE two outlaws whirled their horses, their guns spewing flame. Roy felt a burning stab of pain in his left shoulder. Another bullet grazed his thigh. He dropped to one knee, shooting wildly. This was his first gunfight and the swift, vicious attack of the two outlaws had taken him by surprise. He thought they would obey his command to put up their hands. But Clem Porter and Tom Condron were desperate. They were wanted for murder. They had made their pact not to be taken alive.

Roy Gaynor's head had not quite cleared of the dizzy pain that Riley Burch's beating had left in it. Now the wounded shoulder and the pain in his leg were adding to his bewilderment. His bullets were going wild. His gun snapped empty.

Then, as if in the grip of a nightmare, he saw a third rider. He recognized Riley Burch's big blue roan, saw Riley's sheriff's badge pinned to his shirt pocket glitter in the white moonlight.

Riley Burch, alias the Pecos Kid, was wasting no words. He was letting his gun talk for him. Streaks of orange flame came from the barrel of his six-shooter. The two outlaws reeled drunkenly in their saddles. Their horses, stampeded by the shooting, whirled and reared, throwing their riders.

Riley Burch quit his horse with a swift leap. One of the outlaws was moaning, begging for mercy. The other lay in a sprawled heap, the moonlight on his dead face.

Riley tied the wrists of the wounded man. Then he swung back into his saddle. Sliding his carbine from its scabbard, he shot three times into the air.

From the black depths of Renegade Basin sounded three answering shots. Riley shoved the saddle gun back into its scabbard and reloaded his empty six-shooter. He rode toward the brush where Roy Gaynor stood on unsteady legs, trying with fumbling fingers to eject the empty shells from his six-shooter and shove fresh cartridges into the empty chambers.

"Hurt bad, Roy?"

"Just . . . just nicked a little, Riley."

"If you know ary prayer, say it. You'll never come closer to bein' killed. Men like Clem Porter and Tom Condron don't take much stock in that hands-up stuff. I told you they were killers."

"I didn't know where you were," explained Roy. "I woke up with a headache that half-blinded me. I saw 'em, heard 'em talk. I thought they'd killed you. I know now why you knocked me out. Still playin' big brother."

"You're a light sleeper," Riley declared. "Let's tie up that shoulder. Leg hurt? I'll take a look at it. Tom Condron's dead and Clem Porter's bullet holes might kill him and save him from hangin'. I'll take a look at him directly."

"I heard shootin' down below in the Basin," said Roy curiously.

"I signaled the gents down yonder that the fight was over. They signaled back. They won't come up. And we're not goin' down. I made a little dicker with 'em. Told 'em I was the Pecos Kid and had a little debt to pay off. They know my name is Riley Burch and they saw the law badge. But the whisperin' of the leaves along the outlaw trail has told the story of the Pecos Kid plenty many times. They know the dirty deal that was handed me by these two hoot-owls. I told 'em how Old Man Sam Gaynor took me out of the pen. The Renegade Basin will be empty of outlaws from now on. It'll make a good line camp for the KG outfit."

RILEY had tied a bandage on Roy's wounded shoulder. Roy cussed him and felt gingerly of his battered nose and mouth. But there was a certain something about the cussing, the fighting names Roy called Riley, that brought a grin to the sheriff's face. You had to like a man like a brother to cuss him out the way Roy Gaynor cussed Riley Burch.

"Man," chuckled Riley, "if you could just see that map of yourn. One eye is goin' to be black and shut tight for a week. Your nose is swole like there was a boil on it and you look like one of them lump-jawed steers you sluffed off on Big Mike. If Addie kin love you with a face like that, watch out. It's your money she's after."

"Listen, you big bonehead," said Roy, "I wouldn't marry that girl for all the white-faced cattle and top cow horses in Montana. All she's talked about for two weeks is Riley Burch. How steady goin' you were, and just the kind of a man a girl wanted to claim for keeps. I played all the cards in the deck, but she just laughed at me. I took a solemn oath to quit drinkin' and gamblin'. I told her about the low-down trick I played when I swiped the note she left for Sid to give Big Mike, the note that was to tell Mike she had gone off with me on a strictly cattle deal. I asked her to marry me every chance I got. The last time was

when we counted the five hundred head of two-bit steers into the Wolf Crick cattle pens. Her answer was still no. She's too ornery for this cowhand. If she'll have you, you take her, pardner. My blessin' and condolence are all yourn."

Clem Porter was moaning, begging for somebody to kill him. Riley untied the wounded outlaw's hands and set about dressing his wounds. The renegade fought him with all that was left of his strength.

"Let me die here. I don't want to hang, damn yuh!"

"Then take 'er easy, Clem, because you're dyin'. I'm just tryin' to make 'er easy for you."

Clem Porter lay back, blood trickling from his twisted mouth. There was a bottle of whiskey in the dying outlaw's saddle pocket and Roy fetched it. Riley held the bottle to the dying renegade's mouth.

"That's more than I'd do for you, Pecos, and you know it," Porter said weakly. "You're a white man. Keep your badge polished—"

Those were the outlaw's last words. Riley tied the dead men to their saddles. Each of them leading a horse bearing a grisly burden, Roy and the sheriff rode back toward Wolf Creek ranch.

They met a deputy sheriff with a posse, and Riley turned the dead outlaws over to him. With the recovered money in a gunnysack tied behind Riley's saddle cantle, they rode on to Mike Harlin's place.

Roy's arm was in a sling. Both men were battered, their clothes caked with dust and dried blood. They sighted Addie as she came from the house.

"It's a showdown, Riley," said Roy as they dismounted at the barn. "She'll come to the man she aims to love, honor and disobey!"

Addie Harlin's face was flushed and her eyes were bright as stars. The doctor had just told her that Big Mike would be up and around in a week and that Sam Gaynor would be riding again in less time than that.

She saw the two cowpunchers standing there. Battered, blood-smeared, waiting. She stopped, her smile quivering a little on her red mouth, her eyes soft now, the gay mockery for once gone from them.

"Fighting again?" she asked.

They grinned and nodded, awkward now under the steady look of her eyes.

"Sam Gaynor and Big Mike Harlin," said Addie, "once played a game of poker for a girl they both loved." She was looking now at Riley Burch. There was a mute question in her eyes that he answered with a faint grin and an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

Addie's eyes squinted the way they always did when she smiled. She threw her arms around Riley's neck and kissed him quickly. Behind a mist of unshed tears showed tiny sparks of laughter.

Roy turned toward the barn, grinning back over his shoulder at them.

"You win, Riley," Addie said huskily. "Take the pick of any horse in my Diamond A iron."

Then she let go of him and planted herself in Roy's path.

"Months ago," she said, her words tumbling over one another, "Riley bet his blue roan horse against one of mine that I'd marry Roy Gaynor. Big Mike's daughter just paid off her bet. Don't stand there like a long-geared bonehead. Do something!"

"Well, I'll be—" Roy's good arm grabbed her roughly.

Riley Burch was chuckling softly as he led the horses into the barn.

THE END

The Story of the West

WHILE scouting for General Ashley in hostile Arikara country, Hugh Glass, young Jim Bridger, and another man whose name is not recorded, were savagely attacked by a huge grizzly.

Glass raised his rifle and wounded the bear with a poorly placed shot. The infuriated animal made for his attacker, and the three men began to run for their lives.

Bridger and the other man escaped down the river bank, but Glass tripped and fell and was seized by the bear. He managed to regain his feet and to draw his knife which he plunged again and again into the bear's body.

When the other two men returned they found the dead bear lying across the terribly mauled body of their companion who had evidently collapsed while defending himself against the grizzly. A huge pool of blood had formed under Glass' body.

Believing Glass dead, or at least dying, Bridger and the other man took his weapons, and, fearing that the shot that had been fired some time before might bring a war party on their heads, they

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

fled, anxious to get out of that region as quickly as possible.

A short time later Glass regained consciousness and found himself deserted. He crawled for miles, wounded and exhausted, subsisting on berries and such small game as he could catch without a gun. For a man in his condition the hardships of his existence for the next few weeks were almost unendurable.

Swearing vengeance on his faithless companions who had left him to die weaponless and alone, Glass, weeks later, reached camp and confronted Bridger.

Bridger was so overcome by the "apparition" that he went white with horror. His teeth chattered and his knees knocked together.

Seeing Bridger's unfeigned surprise, Glass relented in his intention to kill him, saving his vengeance for the other and older man.

This strange incident was often recounted by trappers and traders, and Hugh Glass was ever after famous along the frontier as the man who had cheated death.

NEXT WEEK: COVERED WAGONS

BRAND INSPECTORS

BY CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

FOR two generations the brand inspectors have been the cowmen's first line of defense against the cow thief. The idea has grown that these inspectors are either Federal or State officials. Actually, they are employed by the various cattlemen's associations, the oldest and largest of which is the Texas and Southwestern, which was organized away back in 1877. In spite of stringent laws against lifting cows that have been passed by the legislatures of every western State, the local authorities are often helpless in trying to cope with the cow thief for several reasons. The sheriff's authority too often ends at the county line, but the cow thief's range is universal. Then there's the confusion in brands. It is perfectly legal for more than two hundred and fifty men to register the same brand in the State of Texas—a different owner for each county in the State. On the other hand, there are as many as several thousand different brands registered in some counties. The sheriffs can't keep up with the tangled brand system, but the brand inspectors can, and do. Brands are their business. Ninety-nine out of a hundred are old cowhands whose keen eyes have been reading and memorizing brands since before they were old enough to read print. They work at every cattle market, and several of them are always out in the field, eyes peeled for the cow thief, the brand doctor, and the registry slicker.

SIX-PISTOL MEDICINE

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

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NEVER a moral town, from its earliest beginnings, Rifle Gap had become a downright hell-hole when they elected old Jeff Pittman sheriff. Jeff had tried to decline the dubious honor but, as the chairman of the Citizens' Committee had said: "A strong hand and an honest one is what we need most, Jeff, so your fellow citizens are drafting you for a difficult public service. We're depending on you not to let us down."

Reluctantly, Jeff had stood for election, and had won easily. The prospect had dismayed him, for his urge for violence as well as his youth was far along his backtrail. But he had done the best he knew how. A year had proved his best inadequate.

Things had gone from bad to worse. Rifle Gap had grown steadily. A cattle burg in the beginning, it was headquarters now for an ever increasing farm trade, as the bottom lands of Bannock River were preempted and put under the plow. Moreover, mining activity in the Shoshone hills had increased to boom proportions, filling the town with tough, fighting elements that bowed the knee to no one. Yes, Jeff Pittman's best looked pretty futile when Mayor Smith R. Bone called a meeting to discuss the growing crime wave.

Twenty-five of Rifle Gap's most important citizens attended that meeting, called by Mayor Bone in answer to the insistent rumor that the businessmen of the town were at the point of organizing a Vigilante Corps to enforce the law. Smith R. Bone stood on the platform before them now, a stocky, dynamic man with the upturned nose of a prize Berkshire pig. Shaking his fist at the seated townsmen, he bellowed his speech at the top of his high-pitched voice.

"It's got to stop!" he thundered. "It can't go on. Every game in town has been robbed. Our merchants have been stood up in broad daylight. Mines are at a standstill, because they can't ship their clean-ups. Cattle and horses take wings and fly away. Business is at a standstill. It's begun to look as though we can either fold up and leave the country to the renegades or else we can—"

"Carry the war to them hellions!" shouted some irate citizen. "Fire a no-good sheriff an' set up a miners' court. Vigilante law, that's what we gotta have."

Old Jeff Pittman was on his feet, ready to face his accuser. "Never has been a time when you had to fire me," he shouted. "I admit I ain't got nowhere with the situation. But I've got enough confidence in my own ability to believe that no other man could have done better. If it was just one lawless gang, I might have had a chance. But the range is crowded with thieves an' killers. Every man's under suspision. Hell, some of the men we want may be right in this room now—or their spies. No, you don't need to fire me, gents. Any time you want

a change, you can have my star on a silver platter, an' plumb good riddance."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" The mayor held up a restraining hand. "Let's all try to pull together in this. Personally, I hate the vigilante idea. We have statutes on the books an' ways of appointing men to administer them. No community ever got anywhere by taking the law into its own hands."

"Then we gotta have a younger sheriff," bawled an upper valley cowman. "Someone who can get around as fast as the outlaws, somebody with more git-up-an'-go. I move we accept Pittman's resignation."

"Not so fast," the mayor said. "Let's not stampede into something we may be sorry for. I happen to know that Jeff Pittman has done as well as he could do. It's just too much for any one man, like he says. Here's what I'd like to suggest. For some time I've had it in mind to give Jeff some help. How many here will pledge ten dollars a month to give him help?"

A few lifted their hands. One man shouted: "Just throwin' good money after bad, Bone. How long you willin' to put up with failure?"

Smith R. Bone smiled patiently. "That's a fair question, gentlemen. Suppose we say for one month. If progress in that time doesn't suit, we'll try something else. Fair enough?"

AS if in answer to his question, a muffled *boom* struck through the gentle patter of rain upon the town hall roof and the splash of water from the eaves. The barnlike structure shook. "Cripes!" someone yelled. "Thunder an' lightning!"

"Thunder, hell!" Old Jeff Pittman was on his feet, pausing for one clock-tick in an attitude of heavy listening. Then, his face gray and his lips pulled down, he was scrambling over the knees of those between him and the aisle. "That's the bank! Let me outa here! Quick!"

His words brought the gathering up. Men fought for the aisles, then surged to the door. Their urgency retarded the sheriff. Cursing, he fought his way through them, whipping out his pistol as he struggled. As he popped out the door, the hue and cry of an aroused town smashed him in the face. The crash of gunfire, muted by the falling rain, rose to a sharp crescendo. Muzzle flame streaked the night.

Plunging to a stop on the walk before the town hall, Jeff Pittman busied his eyes with the somber night scene. Patches of light from the saloon windows made the intervals of shadow all the more dense. Against those illuminated rectangles could be seen the shapes of townsmen and saloon patrons emerging into the slanting pattern of the downpour. And beyond, darker shadows against the backdrop of night, was the suggestion of nervously dancing horses and the quick flowering of purple buds of muzzle bursts.

Jeff was surrounded at once by the group which had emerged from the hall. Two cowmen among them had already drawn their pistols and were unleashing a senseless fire at those shadows before the bank. Smith R. Bone's thin voice was lifting in warnings:

"Take it easy, boys. Save your lead till you see a target. You may hit our own people and you're sure to draw renegade fire. Jeff, what you want we should do?"

Jeff didn't answer. Time was the important thing and time was fleeting. The bank was a good two blocks

west, too far to hope for anything more than a chance hit. And an advance along the street would provide targets for those covering the bank robbers. He was at the point of ordering a circling movement, by way of the alleys, when someone turned a bull's-eye lantern on the bank front. That showed the set-up plainly.

Two men stood with four horses at the edge of the walk. Two others were even now emerging from the bank, their hands heavy with loot. In a moment it would all be over; the law would have failed again and the rain would quickly blot out all sign of the fleeing robbers.

It was maddening, and that very madness drove Jeff to the horses tethered at the town hall rack. Gunfire had swelled to a steady roar as he jerked a carbine from somebody's saddle boot, pistol fire was interspersed with the heavy concussion of a scatter gun. A rifle was the only hope. Praying that a chance slug would not drop the man with the bull's-eye lantern, Jeff whirled from the rack, leveled a shell into the breech and knelt at the edge of the walk.

The renegades were mounting as he caught the sights. Fine aiming was impossible in such gloom, but Jeff's rifle aim was instinctive anyway and it stood him in good stead now.

A long, curdling yell struck through the town as the four robbers, ramming home the spurs, roared away from the bank. In the light of the shifting bull's-eye, one of the quartet raised in the stirrups, twisted and waved a mocking four-finger salute at the town. Jeff's lead screamed along Frontier Street, took him in the middle. The outlaw folded like an accordion.

Old Jeff emitted a hoarse yell and pumped bullets after the rest. One of the renegades' ponies somersaulted, pitching his rider into the mud. The other two reined up in answer to his scream for help. Jeff tallied another one as he whirled back. The remaining horseman helped his dismounted companion up, spun his pony and vanished into the storm.

Then it was all over. Jeff had hurled the empty Winchester to the walk and was roaring for volunteers to make up a posse. The two outlaws on one horse could make no swift getaway and an organized pursuit should pick them up before noon next day. Numbers of the excited townsmen offered their services and Jeff ran for the stable to get his horse.

He was just turning into the barn when a clarion call sheered through the murmur of the town. "*Fire!*" Voices took it up. "*Fire!* The town hall's on fire!"

There was a quick dash to the fire hall. Bells clanged and the hose cart flashed from its housing, drawn by the volunteer fire crew. Cursing, Jeff Pittman hurried to the stall, threw a saddle onto his horse.

Stung by the pangs of a sensed frustration, Jeff spurred from the stable and roared down to the barn-like meeting building, the windows of which glowed now like live things with the fire that roared through the interior. People milled about the entrance, where the nozzle men turned their puny stream inside. On the cart, six men toiled at the pump brakes, lifting water from the creek bottom.

Singling out familiar faces in the glare, Jeff bawled for men to fulfill their offers to serve as possemen. But they waved him away.

"Wait till after the fire's out, Jeff. What's your hurry? Can't see

nothin' till daylight anyhow."

Argument availed nothing. The lure of the fire was too strong. Mad all through, Jeff whirled his pony, hollered to a friend to tell his wife he had taken the trail of the outlaws and galloped out of town.

Out on the lonely valley road, the wind beat at him, as if it were doing its best to turn him back. Rain came in deluging flurries, soaking through his slicker and drenching him. The horse, slipping and floundering in the muddy road, fought to turn back, but Jeff held it grimly to its course.

Quickly the glare of the town faded behind him. A vast blackness seemed to hold the world. Ten miles of that and Jeff's teeth were chattering; he was numb with cold and quite free of the anger that had driven him out to shame those who had found greater interest in the spectacle of fire.

"Hell," he muttered miserably. "Can't see a thing, can't hear a thing, an' can't do a thing. They may be headin' down the valley by this time, instead of up. An' by daylight, this rain will have washed all tracks clean. I'm a fool."

HE reined around, pulled his head down into his collar and let the pony take its own pace back to town. Dawn was just breaking when he got in, chilled in mind and body. After putting up the horse, he downed a big drink and went home to the comfort of the patient wife who had waited up all night for him.

"More bad news, Martha," he said gloomily, as he changed to dry clothes. "Only one thing worse than bein' sheriff, I reckon, an' that's bein' a sheriff's wife."

The gray-haired woman smiled as she prepared his breakfast. "Don't you be downcast, Jeff Pittman," she said proudly. "Mayor Bone was here last night and what he said made me proud to be a sheriff's wife. You got two of the outlaws and saved the money."

"The money?" Jeff was surprised. "I figgered it was with the pair that got away."

"It was on the horse you dropped, Jeff. Every cent of it. Now come eat and then sleep for a few hours."

But Jeff didn't sleep. When he had finished breakfast, he went uptown. The rain had stopped and the sun was up, bright and warm. Townsmen hailed him as he moved to his office.

"Howdy, Jeff. Good goin'!"

"Pretty work, sheriff. A little more shootin' like that and we'll be free of that scum from the hills."

"Gomorrah's found her master," shouted Deacon Porter with biblical eloquence. "May God be good to you, Jeff Pittman."

After months of growing chilliness, such friendliness warmed the sheriff. But, at the same time, it surprised him. Many townsmen had been shooting at the bank robbers and now they were crediting him with the results. Jeff saw the fine hand of Smith R. Bone in that. Public acclaim would help the mayor put over whatever plan he was formulating. Jeff sat at his desk, wondering about that plan, when Bone came in.

"Great work, sheriff," he boomed. "I saw that shooting of yours and I'll tell the world it was a credit to you and to us. Get any line on the other two?"

"Nary a track."

Mayor Bone shrugged. "It don't matter, Jeff. One of them was hurt, I think, and they won't be in soon again. You knew the money was saved?"

"Wife told me."

"Great stuff. There may be some reward money coming from the bank; don't know for sure. If so, maybe we can use it to give you some real help here."

"What you got in mind, mayor?"

Bone pulled his chair closer. His voice lowered. "Your work last night cleared it up for me, Jeff. That and the fire in the town hall—"

"What you mean?"

"Fight fire with fire, Jeff. That's what those bank crackers tried to do. They fired the hall but didn't wait long enough to make their play. May be some argument to that, but the idea is the thing. We gotta fight fire with fire, Jeff."

"Meanin' what?"

"Bullets! Gunplay! Shoot first and ask questions afterward. Get somebody here who'll shoot down every man that tries to beat the law. You made a good start last night, Jeff, but what we need is a real gunner, a killer fast on the draw and with no conscience to bother him. A few more funerals here, Jeff, and the wild ones will fold up."

"Such as who, Bone?"

The mayor mentioned several names, all notorious and one a killer hunted by the law. Old Jeff's hackles came up and he stepped on the idea with all his force. But Smith R. Bone had not been elected mayor without reason. He brought the pressure of argument against the sheriff. Jeff couldn't match him, and again he offered his resignation.

"The town won't hear of it," said Bone. "Not after last night. But you'll admit things broke lucky for you last night. It may be a long time before you get the best of the wild ones again. One man can't spread himself thin enough, Jeff. And a good man is not savage enough. Now you better listen to me, or we'll have a vigilante uprising here, sure as shooting."

Against his will, and largely through fear of having the citizens take over the law, Jeff allowed himself to be placated. "Come on," he said, rising. "Explain your idea to five, six of our important men. If they like the idea, I'll give it a try."

"Good, Jeff. I knew you'd come around."

They called on a number of businessmen, the mayor explaining what he hoped to accomplish and how. A forceful and convincing talker, he carried his point with them all. He was all smiles when they returned to Jeff's office. The sheriff was glum.

"So be it, Bone," he muttered. "We'll have our gunner an' turn him loose."

"Good. Now my idea is that we ought to have Bravo Jack Gauze, the Texan. I think I know a man who can put his finger on Jack and get—"

Jeff finished strapping on his guns. "We won't need Gauze," he broke in. "When I have a killer bustin' caps for me, Bone, I want to know he's workin' with me. Don't worry, I'll get a man."

"Who you got in mind, Jeff?"

But the sheriff was moving away, striding toward the stable. "Don't know when I'll be back, Bone," he flung over his shoulder. "But when I return, I'll have a man."

"Hey!" Smith R. Bone started after him. But something in the straight and uncompromising lift of the sheriff's back discouraged him.

TWO days later, Jeff Pittman lay belly down like a sunning snake atop a rimrock scrap overlooking the old Outlaw Trail. He was within earshot of the opening to the notorious Hole-in-the-Wall, and he knew his life wouldn't

be worth a plugged nickel if he were caught there, with his carbine jutting before him, by certain lawless elements who frequented the hideaway.

Along about midafternoon, two riders passed along the trail, leading into the Hole. There was a tidy little sum offered for that pair, dead or alive, but Jeff only smiled and let them go.

The sun was sinking in the west when a lone rider came swinging toward the outlaw haven. He was young, a reckless devil with a big gun at each thigh and a ribald song on his lips. One knee was hooked over the horn; his hat was cocked back at a jaunty angle, revealing wavy, blond hair.

Though the face of this rider was not that of a hard-case and his tenor voice as true as a choir boy's, Jeff knew the volcanic temper that lurked beneath that slender chest. For this was the Hillkitty Kid, wanted in many places, for plenty of money. There was nothing good about him, save his looks and his gun savvy.

Jeff's first urge was to call to the youngster. He abandoned the idea, a-borning. Hillkitty was as wild and skittish as a deer, as unpredictable as a wormy bull. Jeff took the only way he knew; he squinted along the barrel of his Winchester, pulled the sights across the shoulder of the Kid's pony and pressed the trigger.

Gun echoes ran smashingly along the gap. The Kid's horse screamed, reared and crumpled into a jerking heap. The young outlaw leaped clear, his hands flashing in a swift draw. Jeff's voice stabbed him.

"Reach, Kid! High! Don't make me kill you! Ah, now you're getting smart. Unbuckle with your left hand. Steady now, 'cause I've got a bead on your heart. That's the stuff. Now hold the belts by the end an' walk to the rim, through this slot. I'll be coverin' you, so don't get any foolish notions."

The outlaw obeyed, yet the stiffness of his lithe young body denoted a reptile readiness to fang. Jeff took no chances. At his order, the outlaw dropped the belts and backed away. Having secured them, the sheriff marched his man to his camp, a full quarter mile away. There, beside a spring, the two men squatted to roll smokes.

"What was the idea, shootin' down my pony thataway? I'm worth as much to you dead as alive."

"I wanted you alive," said Jeff. "So I could talk over your record with you."

"I'm not talkin'."

"'Tain't exactly necessary," grinned the sheriff. "I've got it pretty straight, I reckon. You cut yore first teeth on a six-pistol. An' when you was nine years old, you killed Blacksmith Bill Johnson with a butcher knife—"

"I should've burned him with slow fire," rasped the Kid. "He was abusin' my mother."

"An' then," Jeff Pittman went on, as if he hadn't heard, "you killed Juan Rodriguez for his gun."

"He was pistol whippin' me," the youngster snarled. "Plumb full of tequila, he was. What should I have done, let him beat me to death?"

"Would have saved horseflesh an' a lot of sheriffs' tempers, son. As I recall it, you next killed Hondo Giroux—"

"He had it coming. We was pardners, runnin' wet cattle over from Mexico. He laid a trap, sold me into the hands of the law. He didn't live to spend his blood money."

"That's the trouble with killing,

Kid. Once you start, you can't stop. Then there was Deputy Dandy Sparks."

"All I was askin'," blurted the Hillkitty Kid, his lips trembling, "was a fair chance to work honest. I had a job with the Wagonwheel rough string. He picked me up an' started me to jail, then offered me a chance to escape if I'd dig him up two hundred dollars. I flashed a hide-out on him an' he wouldn't believe his eyes. When I'm hung, it ain't gonna be by no coyote."

"Listen to reason, Kid, an' keep your hands away from that hide-out an' there's no reason why you should hang."

"What's that?" The youth cocked his head. "Come again."

"You say all you ask is a fair chance to do honest work. That still go?"

"They wouldn't let me."

"I'll let you, if you've got enough decency left to shoot square. Have you?"

"By my lights, I've allus shot square. What's up yore sleeve?"

"How'd you like to be my deputy, Kid?"

The youth started, then stared at Jeff as though he were crazy. "Deputy? Where?"

"Rifle Gap. We're tormented with some bad boys that have us outmatched. I have it figgered that you carry the medicine to cure 'em."

The Hillkitty Kid shook his head. "They'd never let me go through with it. They'd force your hand an' strong-arm me into jail."

"You're a stranger in our part o' the country, Kid, an' I'll stand behind you. I promise you a full hour's start when an' if trouble breaks." Jeff handed the Kid his rolled gun belts, grinning at his surprise. "How about it, son?"

The Kid didn't leap at it. There was an hour's talk, and in the end he accepted the offer without enthusiasm. Darkness had fallen when the two pulled away from that camp, both astride the same horse.

THE mayor was openly skeptical of the beardless stripling Jeff introduced as John Law. When he and Jeff were alone, after the introduction, he voiced grave doubts of the success of the experiment and tried to talk the sheriff into changing to an older and more experienced man.

Jeff refused to be moved, smiling thinly when the mayor mentioned the names of men who would have swallowed two of the Kid's slugs before they could have drawn their irons loose.

Failing to convince old Jeff, Bone appeared to reconcile himself. And the next two weeks became the most stirring in Rifle Gap's hectic history. First it was Verde McLin, the boss gambler in the Prairie Saloon. Verde, a chill, cadaverous Texan, had slain a number of men over his games, always clearing himself by pleas of self-defense.

But one day a man staggered into town from the sage flats with a story to tell. He had won heavily at McLin's game and had cashed in. The gambler, following him to the stable, had thrown a gun into his ribs and had ridden him out onto the range. There he had shot him off his horse without a chance, thrown him into a dry gulch and ridden back to town with the money he had paid out. Regaining his senses, the man had crawled five miles to report how he had cheated death.

"Come on," said old Jeff grimly. "We'll go down and face McLin."

The Kid watched them go, a look akin to pity in his eyes. Then he hitched up his guns and walked over

to the town stable, passing knots of townsmen who talked over the appearance of the wounded man. The whole town knew the angle, now that Jeff Pittman had led the man into the Prairie Saloon.

Hence it was no surprise to the Hillkitty Kid to find Verde McLin entering the rear of the barn, his gambling paraphernalia under his arm and a quick getaway in his mind. The gambling man was surprised to find his resistance to arrest far too slow. He died with his boots on, and John Law's rep was made.

He polished that reputation up some by two more shooting scrapes, hard on the heels of the first. Patrolling the town of nights while Jeff slept, he stepped in on two gunmen holding up the Full House Saloon, called their hands and killed them both.

Three nights later, he responded to a call for help, and found a tough beating and robbing a miner in an alley. In a running gunfight in the dark, he dropped the highwayman at the edge of town and recovered the miner's dust. Four men slain in two weeks and nothing to show for it but a bullet scratch on his left arm and the adulation of the townsfolk.

Old Jeff found folks smiling at him jovially now when he passed them on the street. A little help had put the law on the map and the wild ones on the run. They made a lot over the youthful John Law. Mayor Bone threw a banquet for him in the American Kitchen. Staid townsmen made long speeches lauding the sheriff and his deputy.

Jeff was presented with a diamond-studded badge and the Kid with a pair of pearl-handled Peacemakers, inscribed with sentiments of gratitude from the town's businessmen.

Only John Law seemed displeased with results. His ever-growing silence and tendency to brood worried the sheriff. The youth made no complaint, nor did he offer any explanation of his changed manner. He seldom talked at all now and his face grew heavy and far too old for his years.

Mayor Bone noticed it, too, and spoke to Jeff about it. But where Jeff was willing to be patient and wait for the Kid to work out his own inner tumult, such was not the pompous mayor's way.

"The boy's lonely," he opined. "And young enough to have pangs after killing. I'll have a good fatherly talk with him."

So, though it irked Jeff a little, he was not surprised to see John Law and Mayor Bone together often. The mayor had the youth to his home for supper several times and Jeff frequently saw the Kid emerging from Bone's office, where, besides carrying on his official duties, he dealt in cattle, mining and loans.

But whatever manner Bone affected with the Kid, he failed noticeably to cheer him. John Law remained moody and held much to himself. "Itchy spurs," mused old Jeff. "He misses the outlaw trail but he'll get over it. Give him time."

And time was the thing he had most of, in the weeks that followed. The Kid's samples had been bitter and salty, and Rifle Gap knew a startling pause in its wonted lawlessness. Trouble kept its snaky head hidden. Confidence grew, and business with it. And yet, though the merchants and businessmen were pleased with the change, there was, underneath the surface, a repressed tension. It was as if the town waited for something, it knew not what.

Jeff Pittman felt the impact of

that tension and worried about it. He was tossing restlessly one night when the rapping on his windowpane wakened him. The echo of a voice was dying as he reared up in bed.

"Huh . . . wazzat?" he sang out dazedly.

Again that rapping on the window and Smith R. Bone's voice striking through.

"Jeff, pile out! Trouble at the bank! Hurry."

JEFF hit the floor, drew on his clothes and buckled his gun about his waist. With his wife's "Careful, Jeff," ringing in his ears, he darted outside and raced across gloomy rear lots and between buildings to the street. The town was still, too still for Rifle Gap. Without knowing the time, Jeff sensed that the night was far spent.

The street was dark but already his eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom. Shrouded by deep shadows, in a narrow slot between buildings, he peered along the fronts. At first glimpse, nothing appeared amiss. Then he noticed the knot of horses standing at the bank hitch bar. One uttered a sharp snort and commenced pawing. Then Jeff heard a hand slap a hairy flank and a man's growl:

"Shut up, you fuzz-tailed fool. Want to raise the town?"

Jeff couldn't see the speaker, but he knew the man was standing with those ponies. Every nerve humming with tension, his gun dangling in his fingers, Old Jeff froze as some vague noise came from inside the bank, two doors down. He stepped noiselessly to the walk. And then, in the faint starglow, he saw the lone guard standing beside the bank entrance. And his heart sank. It was John Law, the Hillkitty Kid!

Mingled emotions rankled inside the sheriff. Regret that he must cross guns with a youngster of whom he had become really fond. Disappointment that the old adage of the leopard and his spots had proven true again. Self-condemnation that he hadn't guessed what was torturing the Kid during these last weeks, so he could have influenced him toward something better.

Steeling himself to the thing he had to face, old Jeff took two quick steps to bring his deputy into better light. And though he spoke in an undertone, his voice seemed to crash through the stillness.

"I'm with you, Kid."

He saw his deputy freeze, sway backward against the front. Then, despite Jeff's will to lose no move the Kid might make, he started, shifted his gaze as bootsteps woke sudden echoes directly across the street. Mayor Smith R. Bone came darting across the far walk, plumped into the street on the run. His high-pitched voice, a hateful rasp now, sheered along the fronts.

"There he is now! Down him!"

The mayor's gun flung up and, to Jeff, it all seemed like some weird nightmare. The mayor was surging toward him, Jeff Pittman, and the sheriff knew in that moment that Bone was sacrificing him to some unguessed alliance with villainy. Instinct, more than reason, caused the sheriff to hurl himself downward to the walk.

Bone's shot shattered the singing tension of Rifle Gap, and the bullet plowed into the wall above Jeff's head. The sheriff lifted his gun, hesitating only because bewilderment brought the fear that he might be wrong. That was how he happened, from the corner of his practiced eye, to see John Law raise his

Continued on page 129

GHOST TOWNS OF THE WEST

Old Mexico

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

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OLD Mexico, traditionally rich in mineral wealth, has its own ghost towns. Mining camps that once throbbed with activity now lie sun-baked and forlorn, lost in the mountains of the Sierra Madres.

There is Minas Nuevas for instance. New Mines it would be in English, a name which is so hopeful, so full of glittering promise. It was once a bonanza silver camp. It is nothing now but a foothill ghost town, three hundred miles below the Arizona border in the very heart of off-the-trail Mexico. To reach it there is a dirt road that winds for miles through sage and thickets of gnarled mesquite from the railhead at Navajoa. You can make it on a horse or by wagon. If you are prepared to dig back the sharp banks of sudden gullies, and drive over brush, boulders and other hazards of the open country you can make it by car, too. That is, in good weather you can.

In fact the road goes on to Alamos. You can make Alamos too by car provided both it and you are endowed with a chassis sufficiently tough to stand the strain.

Millions came from Minas Nuevas. There is nothing there now. Only the mine dumps, and the wind whistling through the desolate buildings. The natives say the place is haunted, that jackals howl there nights. Peons plodding up the Alamos road, their backs bent under the weight of a bundle of faggots, furtively cross themselves and offer a short prayer as they pass the foot of a hill and steal a quick glance upward at the sun-blistered buildings that are all that is left of Minas Nuevas' former mining glory.

The natives will advise you to continue on to Alamos and leave the spectre mining camp to its own unearthly devices. Only a fool would spend the night there. But if you do, you will make the arduous climb and find exactly nothing, save perhaps a rattlesnake sunning himself on some conveniently flat rock and a rabbit crashing through the thicket at your approach. The strange hush seems to thicken as the sun slips down behind the horizon until at dusk the silence is so thick you could cut it with a knife. It is a tangible, oppressive silence. Something you can feel just as surely as though you put out your hand in the dark and felt the clammy touch of an old cadaver.

Nothing happens. Your bedroll is the same as ever. Just as comfortable. But the night seems longer, and you are glad to see the sun rise early in the morning. Daylight dispels the idea you had all along that you were sleeping in a graveyard. You are not superstitious, of course. Minas Nuevas is just another ghost town. Nevertheless, it feels pretty good to be heading down the hill again and starting off for Alamos.

THERE is still life in Alamos. People there, plenty of them. And there is that jolly little Chinaman who runs—at least, he did the last time I was there—the old hotel on the Plaza that once housed visiting Spanish grandees. He used to set a pretty good table with native fruits and *gallina con arroz, chicken and rice, as the pièce de résistance.*

Sitting down to a meal like that in Alamos, you forget the grass six inches high sprouting from the spaces between the cobblestones on the side streets. You forget the fact that the old footbridge that crosses the creek on the edge of town has all but crumbled so that it is safer by far to ford the stream than trust your weight to the ancient structure.

As for the fine old houses that flank two sides of the Plaza, what if most of them are boarded up and empty? There is one charming residence with great long mirrors in the stately living room and priceless rare old Louis XIV furniture ranged stiffly around the walls. The place is a saloon. If you are a trifle stiff-shirt you can sit in gold, brocaded chairs and gaze at the fine old tapestry wall hangings while you drink a mug of nickel beer.

Or if you are one of the bunch and the proprietor knows you, you can push through to the back room where the bar is, and either there or out in the shaded, walled-in courtyard sit down and enjoy your drink in the more customary surroundings or ordinary barroom furniture.

Moreover, in Alamos you are almost sure to find a few prospectors or miners hanging around the square, or sitting on the hotel porch talking. Mostly they talk about mines they own back somewhere in the Sierra Madres. One or two-man projects as a rule, though some sustain the pay roll of a half dozen native miners to do the heavy work.

Most of these men are American. But you will run into the inevitable Englishman, probably a Scotchman or two, a few Germans and now and then a son of France—an international brotherhood joined by the common bond of wanderlust and the eternal hope of finding gold.

They come into town every so often for their mail, and a fling at city life in Alamos. Alamos doesn't look very big when you first reach it from the States, but it is surprising how its stature increases after you have been out alone prospecting the mountains for a few months. It has grown to the proportions of a metropolis by the time you get back. Hasn't it got a hotel with beds in it, a place or two to quench your thirst, stores in which to buy what you need, and, best of all, people to talk to? Men who speak your own language, regardless of their mother tongue, because they, too, are prospectors who have given up home and friends for the great adventure of seeking gold and silver in the far places of the earth.

To the scant handful of these men who pull into Alamos regularly, it represents as much as it did to its own citizens in its heyday. For Alamos is just a wraith of its old self. Time was when the silver mines in the neighborhood were pouring out millions in bullion every year from their bonanza-rich surface outcroppings. Those were the really gay days when fiestas were held every week and every one of the slim-waisted, dark-eyed señoritas who attended the fashionable balls given by the Mexican mine owners was a millionairess in her own right.

That's all gone now. Most of the mines have been worked out. Some were gutted and destroyed by the

various *revolutionistas* who swept the country in the past, punctuating Mexico's stormy political history with bloodshed and rapine and the willful destruction of incredible amounts of property. But Alamos was rich in its day, and being rich it formed a natural target for every impoverished rebel leader in the surrounding country. They were drawn to it as a place where ransom would be readily paid and silver for their own enrichment could be stolen. After all, a town that had a wedding such as Alamos once had was bound to be just the antidote any revolutionist needed for a flat purse.

THAT wedding was noted, not only in Sonora but through all Mexico for years. It is yet remembered, still talked about. The whole thing was the idea of the bride's father, a stately old don who owned one of the best silver mines in the vicinity. He determined to pull off a little stunt that would give Alamos something to think about for years. And he succeeded.

The wedding, as was the custom, was to be held in the church at the head of the plaza. The bridal procession was to walk from the bride's home among the swanky residences that fronted the plaza to the church, about a city block away. But the wealthy old codger decided no daughter of his was going to parade to her marriage along the common brick pavement used by every Tom, Dick and Harry. No, sir, and he wasn't going to pull any cheap stunt like laying down a carpet of rose leaves to receive the tread of his darling daughter's tootsies, either.

The night before the marriage was to take place he had workmen rip up the pavement the whole distance from house to church. All night long carts rumbled along the plaza, their wheels creaking under the heavy load of the solid silver bars they contained, each bar polished until it shown with eye-dazzling whiteness in the gleam of moonlight. The bars came from papa's mine, and there was approximately half a million dollars' worth of silver in the new pavement.

Next day the bride-to-be's little high-heeled shoes clicked over the silver sidewalk as the bridal procession traveled churchward. The bride was thrilled, and Alamos stood agape at the spectacle of a half million dollars' worth of silver being used to walk on. It would be a grand finale to the whole exciting episode if I could truthfully report that after the wedding, the silver bars were torn up and given to the church or charity. But the facts seem to be that papa was no sucker. He put on a show. When it was over, he lost no time yanking up those silver bars and having them transported back to the guarded strong room at the mine where he stored his bullion.

Anyhow there is no silver pavement around the plaza at Alamas now. I know because I looked. I thought papa might have skipped a brick in his hurry to get them back to safety.

Minas Nuevas never put on any such fooforaw as that silver-lined wedding down at Alamos. Maybe because Minas Nuevas was largely an Americanized project. The two places contrast strongly. Families still live in Alamos in a sort of musty, decaying grandeur. Minas Nuevas is empty, almost forgotten, a ghost town such as might be found above the border. Alamos is purely Mexican. It wasn't built in such a hurry, and it will last a great deal longer.

THE END.

TERROR OF SALADA HILLS

By ANSON HARD

WS—4D

TERROR OF SALADA HILLS

BY ANSON HARD

GREENISH points of hate glinted in Pete Waterton's eyes as he faced the young horse-hunter, and his lips curled in a mirthless snarl. The Winchester in his hands was still hot, but no hotter than the temper of the man who faced him.

"If I wanta take a crease shot at a wild stallion, I reckon it's my business, ain't it? Who the hell do yuh think yuh are? Think yuh own this hull country?" Waterton threw back his head, shaking the coarse black locks that straggled beneath his hatband. Behind him Jim Brodie's flat face was a pudgy moon around button eyes.

Dal Merrick teetered on the balls of his feet. He was younger than either of these men by ten years, and his lean, wiry body didn't look dangerous—not when they had him two to one in these desolate stretches of the Salada Hills. He knew the pair to be ringy and mean. He had tangled with them before. The last time had been in a crooked card game down in Kingman. And Pete Waterton wasn't one to forget an enemy.

"Listen, Waterton," Merrick tried to keep his voice down, "I'm after that red stallion myself. I was drifting him toward my horse-trap when you up and take a shot at him with a rifle. If you can catch him and ride him honest, he's yourn. But I'm danged if I'm going to let him be killed by some galoot with a rifle."

Dal didn't believe in creasing, the placing of a slug just behind a wild horse's ears to stun him. The wavering of a hairbreadth in the gunsights might send lead crashing into the horse's brain. Pete had missed on his first shot, which proved he wasn't an expert. The next try he'd likely as not kill the horse.

Besides, Waterton and Brodie were not mustangers. Whatever they were doing in these hills, it had nothing to do with capturing the wild ones. Merrick knew he was twisting the devil's tail to brace the pair, but his heart was set on getting that red horse.

Pete Waterton's big shoulders swelled. He was heavier than Merrick by thirty pounds and had the disposition of a bully. His eyes narrowed craftily.

"So yuh think yuh can act salty, huh? We might as well settle things once fur all. I hate yore guts, yuh whippersnapper, an' I ain't forgettin' that time yuh accused me o' cheatin'."

Waterton took a step forward. He hadn't tried to swing the rifle into a menacing position—Dal's hand was poised dangerously close to the holster—but there was a threat in the way Waterton moved. His heavy form blotted the figure of Brodie. "I swore I'd take it outa yore hide fur that Kingman deal—"

Waterton suddenly leaped back. His move had been a signal to his flat-faced partner. Dal Merrick found himself staring into Jim Brodie's Colt. Jim had made his draw, unseen behind Waterton.

"H'ist 'em!" ordered Brodie. "Grab clouds, you squealer. I reckon we're givin' the orders now."

Waterton threw down his rifle with a bellow. "Hold it on him, Brod. If he moves, give him the lead. I reckon I been waitin' fur a minute like this."

COLD alarm raced Merrick's nerves as Pete Waterton reached out to empty his holster. But the big man overlooked one thing—that his opponent was an expert bronc-twister. Dal's muscles were trained to lightning speed, a quickness that could evade the flashing heels of a bronc even in the dark.

Dal's hand lashed downward in a blurring movement. His fingers closed on the outthrust wrist. At the same moment he threw his weight in the opposite direction, jerking Waterton into the line of fire. A thunderous detonation enveloped the two. Gravel whipped upward and stung their faces. Brodie had just time to deflect the muzzle as he squeezed trigger.

Merrick released Waterton's wrist and dived crazily; yet every movement was calculated. He pawed leather as he rolled and came up firing from the dust.

He didn't aim to kill. Even in his anger, he had no desire to do that. He had a decent respect for human life and a conviction that a man oughtn't to take the law into his own hands if he could avoid it. He must play for Brodie's arm. Once, twice his gun roared.

Jim Brodie's flat face twisted in agony as his weapon dropped to the ground. He clutched at a wounded forearm and blood seeped through his fingers. "Damn you!" he howled. "Damn you!"

Waterton's gaze went stupid. He pawed toward his own holster too late. Without a word, he lifted his hands as Merrick covered him.

"Vamoose!" Dal said harshly. "The next time I won't be shootin' at no gun hands."

Waterton didn't answer at once. His temple veins swelled and his throat purpled. "Yuh tricked us that time. Some day yuh won't have a gun an' I'll wring yore neck—"

"Git!" Merrick ordered.

They left, mounting stiffly and disappearing down a gully. Dal holstered his gun thoughtfully. He knew he was bound for trouble, bad trouble, if the two men remained in the Salada Hills.

What, he kept asking himself, were these jaspers doing in the hills anyway? His eyes peeled the ridges and his mind was warily alert as he got back on the trail of the red stallion and his band of mares again. He was pressed for time now. Pete Waterton might kill the horse out of pure spite if opportunity offered. Damn the treacherous pair, anyway!

If Waterton hadn't horned in with his crease-shooting, Dal might have had the wild band corralled by nightfall. He had been drifting them in the right direction, straight toward his horse-trap. Now with the fear of lead in him the red stallion might race far. It was a shifty turn of fate that had brought Waterton into the picture.

Merrick spent two days in futile searching. It was the third morning that he came unexpectedly upon an abandoned wagon. He reined in abruptly. It was the first time he had seen an outfit this far off the north trail.

The front wheel of the cumbersome vehicle was broken, tilting the box sharply. The tongue was snapped like a rotten stick. The

remains of a settler's household goods filled the interior.

Merrick rode around it before dismounting. "Funny they'd leave all their plunder," he mused.

Signs were easily read. The occupants had abandoned the broken wagon and taken to horses. Dal slipped to the ground and looked more closely. Little seemed to have been taken from the wagon. Trunks, boxes, tools were in disorder. Several white garments had been pulled from the trunk, among them a woman's petticoat. Strips apparently had been torn from these. He noticed an embroidered "A. P." on the feminine garment. Several dark spotches stained the floor boards.

"Somebody got hurt," he murmured half aloud. "Bandages. They was racin' toward the settlement and busted down. They went on with the horses. Hm-m-m." It might all have been a trail accident; yet he had a hunch that was not the explanation.

There was nothing he could do, Dal told himself. The owners would be coming back in time to retrieve the goods. He rode away thoughtfully. Could the wrecked wagon have any connection with Waterton and Brodie being in the hills? Probably not.

AT midafternoon hope flared again suddenly. Dal came upon the red stallion and his band not a mile eastward of his trap, grazing on the far side of a flat. All thought of Waterton or the abandoned wagon faded from his mind.

A sharp-walled coulee gouged the ridge that walled the western side of the flat. This ravine led directly into Merrick's winged horse-trap. If he could start the red horse through the cut, capture was certain. He circled carefully. Ten minutes later he appeared on the eastern side of the flat.

For seconds nothing happened. Then, as if scenting danger, the red horse threw up its head. Merrick could see it race in a narrow circle, its great muzzle lifted to the breeze. Dal rode slowly forward about a hundred yards. All the band was upon the alert now. Its head lashing up and down, the leader raced back and forth between them and the rider. Then as if shot from a catapult, the red stallion drove at his own band, his ears laid low.

The dozen colts and mares were away in a thunder of hoofs, the rising dust hiding the band. Like a blur of movement they were into the coulee. Merrick fogged spurs. He must be into the cut himself before they backtracked.

His heart was pounding as his own cayuse entered the defile. Luck had broken, but there was tough work ahead. Not noise but silence perked him forward in the saddle. There should be a drum of circling hoofs, a fighting at the bars.

Two minutes later Dal Merrick rode up to a completely empty horse-trap!

It took seconds for the truth to penetrate his brain; then a curse tore from his throat. Sections of the trap walls had been wrecked, poles and crossbars pulled away. The charred remains of a fire showed that the materials had been destroyed.

The wild band had gone straight through, unstopped.

Like a stabbing knife thrust Dal knew who was responsible. Waterton! Out of pure spite Pete had wrecked the trap, voided the capture of the red horse. Dal Merrick's face went white.

In time his anger cooled. The full craftiness of the trick showed itself. Had they merely wrecked the panels

he might have rebuilt them, but with the poles burned he was helpless. He had exhausted all nearby timber in constructing the trap. Poles would have to be dragged for miles now, a labor of days, weeks. Waterton had destroyed only a few panels in the walls and wings, but he had rendered the trap worthless. Dal Merrick threw his hat upon the ground and kicked it in helpless rage.

It was an hour before he remembered the settler's abandoned wagon. He stiffened, a possible solution occurring. A thin chance it was, but not entirely hopeless. He swung into his saddle and rode back to the abandoned wagon. From among the supplies he selected a picket rope, all the scattered white garments, and a ball of towline.

"I'll be payin' the homesteader for these when I find him," he told himself. "I reckon I'll be payin' somebody else too—when I find him!"

THE next morning he was hard at work upon his broken trap. Across the smaller breaks he stretched the towline, tying on it fluttering strips torn from the petticoats. Across the greater break at the west end he swung the picket line, knotting it securely to the remaining uprights. He took greater care here, knotting larger pieces of cloth at close intervals. He looked at the finished work dubiously. The scare lines were spider web strength compared to the power of the wild horse, but strong in their power of alarm. The spooky wild steeds should turn back from those fluttering rags quicker than from a stone wall.

Then Dal set out again upon the trail of the red horse, hoping to swing the animal before he drifted far. Dal knew the ranging ground of this band, yet for two days he visited the accustomed haunts without success. His resentment against Waterton grew with each hour.

Noon of the third day Dal was in the broken, canyon-splotched country just north of his trap. He squatted beside a spring, permitting his cayuse to rest and graze. He did not know what forced him to whirl around. An impelling urge caused him to turn. On a ridge to the eastward, clearly outlined in the midday sun, the sorrel stallion perched like a sentinel.

Merrick crouched motionless. It was always like that. Unexpected sight of the magnificent steed affected his nerves like buck fever.

The red horse was not looking in his direction. Neck arched and muzzle lifted, its sharp intelligent ears pricked, it stood tense, motionless. Then in a single movement like a spinning top it whirled and lashed down the far side of the ridge, angling south.

Merrick jerked upright. What in blazes had scared the stallion? Dal whipped into leather and spurred toward the ridge. He might still have a chance to try his scare-line trap. If his trick worked, just for minutes' time—

Then Dal reined in sharply. Half a mile away he could see the abandoned wagon. Five or six men were collected about it. The sun glinted upon rifle barrels. Even as Merrick watched they swung into leather and pressed toward the southeast.

"That looks like a trouble party. What's up, horse?"

Under other circumstances he would have ridden to overtake them. Not now. He must be east of the flat if the wild horses drummed into it.

Luck broke this day with amazing swiftness. Dal came into the east

side of the valley just as the red horse and his mares cantered across the middle. He wasted no time now in slow drifting but fogged the spurs deep, let out a yell like an Apache whoop, and fanned straight toward the cantering band.

The red horse swung in a circle, forelegs dancing. Twice he shuttled back and forth, then whirled toward the gorge that had been his escape before. Merrick had banked on the red horse remembering.

Dal was only two hundred yards behind when the last of the colts disappeared into the coulee. He unslung his lariat as he rode. He must be ready and he must not miss. He'd only get one chance. If only his spider-web fence held, turned back the wild stallion.

The drum of circling hoofs filled Dal's ears like music. He flexed out the lariat that no twists might spoil his throw. He was through the wings to the trap inlet. The snorting band swept in a circle before him as he came into view. The stallion reared and plunged like a projectile toward the west side where the picket rope swung.

FOR one blazing moment despair blanked Dal. If the red horse hit the rope all was lost. It would snap like packing thread. The stallion was two rods from it when a gust of breeze flapped out the streamers.

A steel wall could not have stopped the red horse quicker. It slithered almost to a sitting position, hoofs plowing the dirt. Its trumpet of alarm rang vibrantly. Then it was rearing back, teeth bared, eyes rolling. It did not stop at sight of the rider. Horse and man were less fearful than the flapping fence.

Dal's cayuse threw up its head, stepped gingerly. The mustanger's rope arm worked automatically, the loop building. The red stallion stopped for one stretched second, head lowered, neck weaving. Teeth bared again, it charged.

The trained cayuse side-stepped like springy steel. The red stallion missed its target by a yard as the loop hissed. It had no time to dodge the settling loop. Merrick wound a dally with deft fingers, easing himself for the jolt.

The cayuse, knowing what was coming, whirled and set itself. The lariat snapped taut like a plucked wire as twelve hundred pounds of bolting lightning hit the far end.

The red stallion turned a complete somersault, heels to the sky. It hit hard. The cayuse set back upon the rope as if its life depended on the pull. Then the red horse went limp, quivering. Dal feared for a moment he had broken the stallion's neck.

He slipped to the ground and raced forward with his pigging string. The fallen horse breathed wheezingly. Merrick hog-tied it and stepped back. He eased the loop. With its first breath the horse tried to lunge to its feet, thrashing the sand with its bound hoofs. Merrick smiled, the first smile on his lips for days.

"Take it easy, old fellow. You're goin' to have a chance to use them legs and damn quick."

On the far side of the trap, the whirled band of mares side-swiped the rope. It went down with a snap. The band went through, scattering like rabbits. No matter. A few mares lost meant nothing now. Merrick was pressing his luck hard. The wine of success filled him.

He had not meant to break the wild stallion immediately on capture, but the temptation was too great. "When luck lights on you, bet your shirt," was his axiom. He raced back

and stripped the saddle from the cayuse. Seconds later it was cinched to the gleaming, sorrel back.

Dal unstrapped the rifle boot, laid sheath and long gun aside. He unbuckled his cartridge belt that he might be hindered by no extra weight. The noose was still about the red's neck. He slipped the rope farther toward the ears, took a turn about the velvety muzzle, and fashioned a rough hackamore. The stallion began to fight with its tied hoofs. It was a tough job to release the pigging string. Sweat stood on Merrick's brow, but he made it. He was atop the wild steed when it arose.

The stallion went up, and Merrick almost jolted the planets. He rode air but he still had the stirrups. The jolt when the stallion landed stiff-legged fairly drove his neck through his head.

After that Merrick attended strictly to business. He had edged down tough ones before, but this horse was nearly his master. It tried no fancy rodeo-horse tricks; just a terrific, fear-maddened fight to dislodge the clinging weight. Trumpeting screams blew froth and slobbers yards into the air. The red horse bucked, kicked, lunged, snapped at the rider's legs with gleaming teeth, tore the dirt until dust hung like a plume over the wrecked horse-trap.

Pain hammered Merrick's brain until it was ready to burst his eardrums. There was no timer's whistle to tell him the ride was over. He had to stick it out, stay on though hell broke loose. Red haze fogged his eyes. At times he kept his seat only by a miracle.

The bucks grew less vicious. Merrick began to talk, soothing, quieting words. The pin ears pricked. The head went down less far. Fatigue was beginning to tell. The great eyes rolled. With a last surge of strength the stallion leveled out, tried a hammering race up the coulee. Merrick pulled it in, slower, slower. Endurance could go no farther. It staggered to a stop at last and stood with legs braced wide apart.

IT was minutes before Merrick got slowly from the saddle. He slid easily, slowly. His face was crimson with suffused blood. His pulse was a thunder in his ears. He didn't walk away. He eased forward until he could put his arms about the stallion's neck. It leaned wearily against him. With his bandanna Dal began to wipe the slobber and froth from its muzzle.

"Hold it, cowboy! Hell, yuh got that red devil busted jest in time. He'll be r'arin' to go ag'in, an' right now I'm needin' a fast horse."

Halfway down the coulee side stood Pete Waterton, a Colt leveled in his hand.

Instinctively Merrick's right hand flashed toward a holster that was not there. Impotent rage engulfed him. Even disarmed it stormed from his throat. "Just try to take this horse!"

Dal didn't try to reason the cause of Pete's presence. Waterton was an hombre who might show up unexpectedly anywhere. But Merrick did notice that there was a frantic, desperate look in the big man's eyes.

"Try to take 'im?" he roared. "I am takin' him. If yuh got a notion I wouldn't salivate yuh, jest try to stop me. Now, git!"

"If I had a gun—"

"But yuh ain't got a gun." Waterton was plowing down the coulee side, disregarding brush and thorns that ripped at him. "Keep on movin' back, I say. The red devil's only winded. He can still run the livin' daylights outa any horse. Git back."

A watery feeling of frustration weakened Merrick's joints. He couldn't argue against a leveled gun. He backed slowly five yards, ten yards. Hot rage choked him. To see Waterton take the horse was like salt in a wound.

Waterton was striding toward the recovering steed. The stallion stiffened a little, raising its head. Muscles quivered under the sleek hide. Pete seized the slack of the hackamore rope, grabbed for the saddlehorn.

On any horse but the wild stallion he might have made leather. But the lust for battle was not yet stilled beneath the sorrel skin. Without warning, it doubled in the middle like an elastic band, hind hoofs whipping forward viciously.

Waterton was horseman enough to dodge, but not with sufficient quickness. The point of a hoof caught him on the thigh, bowled him backward. An inch closer and that hoof would have snapped the bone.

The released stallion went into the air, bucking the saddle. Then seeing the stretch of the coulee it leveled again into a run.

A terrific curse exploded from Waterton's lips. The gun was still in his hand. "Yuh red-hearted ornery devil, I'll blow yore brains out!"

MERRICK saw the movement and started forward too late. The Colt roared and the thunder of the shot rolled along the ravine. The stallion plunged forward on its nose as if battered down by an invisible ax. Hitting with a force that doubled its neck, it pitched on its withers, hind hoofs in air, and settled into a motionless heap.

Then Dal Merrick saw red. This wanton killing was the last straw upon his accumulated anger. He hardly knew how he crossed the intervening space. He saw only Pete Waterton and was onto him, a merciless avenger. He plunged the last two yards like a diver.

A shock battered his brain as his head crashed Waterton's jaw. He heard a stifled grunt as the other was, for a split instant, stunned. Dal's left hand struck at Waterton's gun arm, and the weapon fell away.

Waterton was stunned only for a second. His pawing arms grappled Merrick and pulled him down. Then Waterton whirled over, turning the lighter man beneath him. He raised Merrick's head and shoulders up and crashed them down with a force that sent stars zigzagging before Dal's eyes.

In the matter of weight, Waterton had the advantage, but he was fighting a man who could outstay a wild horse. Dal squirmed to one side, broke the holds. Both made their feet, slugging as they came. Merrick felt the impact of fists beating him back. His own fists landed, but they could not stop the heavier man. Waterton crashed through Dal's guard, and once, twice landed like a battering-ram below Dal's ear.

The world swam before Dal's eyes. Waterton's figure blurred to Merrick. He shook his head, clearing his sight. Then Waterton made a tactical error. Instead of following up with his fists he kicked foully, viciously at Merrick's stomach.

Dal side-stepped like a gingery bronc. His hands, diving, caught the boot and heaved upward.

Waterton, caught off balance, went down on his back. He hit hard. Dal plunged at him the moment he landed, all the weight of a horse-hunter's body backing up his fist. The knuckles caught the point of the chin with an enervating thud. Pete's eyes glazed as the big body went limp.

"Jest hold it, feller. Step back now. We're settin' in on this game!"

The two fighters looked up. There on the coulee rim a half dozen horsemen sat with ready guns.

Merrick stepped back, his lungs heaving. He saw in a flash that these men were neither ranchers nor mustangers. They wore the garb and heavy boots of homesteaders, and there was grim determination on every face. He remembered the men he had glimpsed about the abandoned wagon.

They pushed their horses down the slope. The pale blue eyes of the leader burned Dal. "We're after two hombres what been holdin' up settlers' wagons. We dropped one east yonder, when he tried to spur away. His partner headed this way. I reckon he's one of yourn."

"By God, we'll hang him too," declared another. "Fur murder. They shot Ben Peterson afore they robbed him. His wife tried to drive the wagon in but got lost an' broke down. She fetched Ben on a horse, but he died."

Growling threats followed the speech. The men's tempers were raw. "Hanging's too good fur him, robbin' a settler of his homestead stake."

Facts cleared in Merrick's mind. So this accounted for the wrecked wagon, and for Waterton's presence in the hills. Robbery, murder! These men had already downed Brodie. They would certainly use short shrift with Brodie's partner.

PETE WATERTON was lumbering to his feet. Craft burned in his eyes. His stubby finger indicated Dal. "So that's who this feller is, a robber an' a killer, huh? Damn the sneakin' polecat! Why he jumped me an' tried to steal my horse, an' me jest a-breakin' it. Took a shot at me, he did, an' hit the horse. See that." He pointed to the fallen stallion. "I tried to brace him but he downed me, all tired as I was with my horse-breakin'."

Angry exclamations came from the homesteaders. Hot eyes bored Merrick. It took seconds for Waterton's trick to sink home, but when it did Dal saw that they were convinced. They took him for the partner of Brodie instead of Waterton. Facts supported the big man's statements. Merrick knew he would have to think fast. He had hardly expected that his last tangle with Waterton would end like this.

A squat rider unlooped a rope. "Let's git this over with," he growled.

Pete Waterton's thick lips spread in a malicious grin.

"Wait." Dal's mind was churning. "This fellow says he's the horse-trapper. Ask him how long he's been here."

Waterton was momentarily taken aback, but smooth words came. "Me? Hell, I ain't been away from here fur a week. I been repairin' my horse-trap. Yuh kin see it's been busted down—"

Merrick whirled upon him savagely. "You lie! If you ain't been away from here, how'd you make scare lines outa women's petticoats. Answer me that."

Pete's face went stupidly vacuous. He didn't know about the scare lines. Stammering words choked in his throat.

Merrick swung toward the others. "One of you ride around that trap. See what you find. Make this man prove where he got that cloth."

The squat man spurred away. In minutes he was back. His face was a black cloud. He was waving a piece of cloth. "The big feller's

lyin'. He's had to be away from this trap. Look at that—'broidered initials, 'A. P.' Amanda Peterson. I know 'cause my wife 'broidered them initials an' give the petticoat to Mrs. Peterson afore we left Missouri. He's the one. He's jest usin' this horse-trap here as a alibi—"

"Furthermore," cut in Dal, "if I'm the one that shot the sorrel horse, how come he's wearin' the holster? He's not the horse-trapper. He's not been here for a week. He didn't know nothin' about my scare lines, and he would 'a' knowed if he'd been the horse-trapper. You lied yourself right into a noose that time, Waterton."

Sanity left the big man's eyes. Bestial fury twisted his face. Hate toward the man who had frustrated him, turned his lying words back upon himself, swept him beyond reason. His hand flashed inside his shirt.

"Yuh blasted whelp! I'll settle yuh first—"

Flame spat almost with the appearance of the hold-out gun. But Dal Merrick had read Waterton's intention in the split second required to weave his body at the hips, the old instinctive movement that evaded the hoofs of a fighting bronc.

Scalding fire lapped his side. He might have guessed a jasper of Waterton's caliber would pack a hold-out. No helping that. He dived toward the fallen gun in the dirt. His fingers touched it, closed on the butt.

There was no time for trick shooting now; no trying for a gun hand. Waterton's next bullet would come before the slower homesteaders could get into action. Life hung in fractional seconds. He saw only the big form of Pete Waterton as the retrieved gun kicked in his fingers. A searing muzzle blast blinded Dal. Dust and gravel stung his face. Two reports blended into one. Waterton was sagging, pitching—

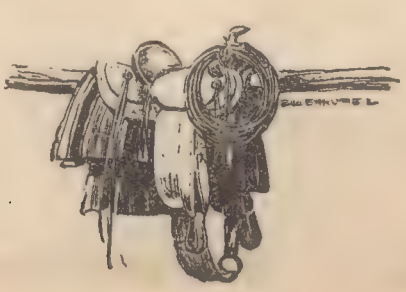
Startled grunts came from the homsteaders as Merrick got shakily to his feet. Silence dropped for heavy seconds. The words of the blue-eyed man came to Dal like a voice far away.

"Lord!" he breathed. "Lord! I reckon you done our work fur us, young feller, and you done it in self-defense. What the thunder! Look at that horse!"

Merrick stared unbelievingly. The red stallion was heaving to its feet. It stood, weaving unsteadily, its great head hanging. From behind its ears a thin trickle of blood streamed.

Merrick dropped the weapon in his hand and ran forward. "Creased, creased perfect," he whispered, "and he never aimed to. The horse is all right. I reckon that's the luckiest shot Pete Waterton ever made."

THE END.



DEATH AT SUNRISE

By C. K. SHAW

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CHAPTER I

ARREST

YOUNG Steve James felt his blood cooling, the pulse die in in his temple. He studied the three Rangers closing in on him. He could get one of them, possibly two, but the third was certain to tally a count.

He watched the sun slide off their badges and hated their hard determination. They represented a force that had come to wreck the cattle country between the Pecos and the Rio Grande. Texas had sent them to protect the homesteader against such men as old Abel James, young Steve's grandfather. That was one cause for hating them, but there was still another reason for his bitterness.

Young Steve's name was not really James. He was the child of old Abel's daughter, not his son. Twenty years before, a young Ranger, Stephen Homan, had ridden through this section between the Pecos and Rio Grande and had fallen in love with beautiful Nellie James, Abel's daughter. Six months after they were married he had been called to the Brazos to fight Indians.

When Nellie Homan died at the birth of her son, Abel James had sent his foreman on the eight-hundred-mile ride to carry the news. Stephen Homan sent back no word nor did he ever come. He ignored his son, and Abel gave the baby the name of James.

Now after nineteen years, Stephen Homan was back. He had come to fight old Abel and his kind.

"His eyes had changed most durin' these years," Abel told his grandson the evening after he had seen the Ranger captain in town. "They're lifeless now, like grimy steel, but underneath they're still hard." The old man's voice was thoughtful. "He's an officer now and sure fire at bringin' in his man. He'll be a bad enemy, Stephen Homan, for he ain't a coward!"

"He didn't have the courage to take on the raising of a son!" the youth retorted.

Abel's frosty brows twitched. "I ain't for him, Steve," he said slowly, "but as you get older you'll learn that grief does strange things to men. It bends and twists them. Stephen Homan loved your mother more than most men love a woman. Figure things out your own way, boy, only don't brand your dad a coward. He'd ride straight-lipped against a loaded cannon."

It was this daredevil kind of bravery, mingled with the lawless courage of the Jameses that made the country speak of old Abel's grandson as Wild Steve James. At times his dark eyes were as tranquil as his mother's had been, but mostly they were stormy like old Abel's. His hair was the same rich brown his mother's had been, but the speed with which his fingeres wrapped around a gun had come to him from his father. That and the slim layers of steely muscles hardly showing beneath his shirt.

THE Ranger standing before Steve watched every line of his hard young face like a hawk: "I know your rep with a gun," he warned. "Don't be a fool, James, we got you three to one. Captain Homan gives you his word your trial will be a fair one."

Young Steve's lips twisted in a bleak smile. "I'd rather swing from a cottonwood than owe anything to Captain Homan. Tell him that!"

A nerve twitched in the Ranger's face.

"You want me for murder," the youth went on. "You charge me with shooting a man in the back."

"You ordered the dead man off the James place," the Ranger answered him. "You were the first to ride out of the brush after he was shot."

"I ordered him off land the Jameses have protected for forty years and aim to go on protecting. And I followed him to see he left, but I didn't shoot him in the back. We might as well settle things now." Steve's voice sank to a whisper as he finished.

The shadow of the adobe ranchhouse cut slanting across the hard earth and sheltered the four men from the rays of the noon sun. To all sides of them spread Running A acres, old Abel's brand. Steve's eyes were burning with the courage of as wild a strain of blood as ever flowed. Texas, since the early days, had felt the strength of the Jameses, had known their courage and their lawlessness.

"Call the play," he said. "You're holding up the action."

"Are you afraid of an honest trial?" the Ranger asked. "To end things this way would be to confirm your guilt, show your fear of a trial. I've listened to a hundred stories of the courage of the Jameses and I had an idea they could take their medicine. I hope the strain ain't weakening. I promise a fair trial in the name of Captain Homan. If that ain't enough, we'll start the trade-off. There's been enough time wasted."

There was heavy solemnness in the tones; an authority that could not be bluffed. Young Steve knew the final word had been said. In another second the Rangers would step into the fight. He wasn't afraid, but his temples had again begun to throb.

A new force was bearing down on his wildly racing blood. A force that held him from crouching to his gun, a force he had never felt before, could not explain to himself. Its roots lay too deeply hidden for him to uncover in the few instants left. He had to fight or surrender.

As he straightened away from his gun, he felt some other man was thinking and acting for him. His face was drawn, but the wrists he held forth for the handcuffs were steady as iron.

"I'll go with you to town," he said, and that other man was speaking for him. Then fire whipped to his eyes. "But tell Captain Homan what I said; that I'd rather swing from a cottonwood than accept a favor from him!"

The leathery face of the Ranger facing Steve was unmoved. "I'll tell him," he said. "My name is Poke, Ed Poke. The captain said you'd be a hard man to bring in."

DURING the ride to Three Adobes, Steve James thought over the things the Ranger had told him. The man shot in the back in Salt Canyon had been a Ranger, one sent out to order old Abel to cease annoying a certain homesteader, Jed Atkins.

Now Atkins was going to testify that Steve James had killed that Ranger, and his daughter, Kitty, was going to back up his words.

Steve recalled the first time he had seen Kitty, standing tense against the boards of the house Jed Atkins had thrown up on James land. Her lips had been tightly pressed, but something in his eyes had released her fear. When she had tried to look away, his glance had held her.

Jed Atkins had sneered at the offer old Abel had made to buy back land that had been his for forty years.

"The government is back of us homeseekers," Atkins announced. "I'm not sellin' at any price. Get off my land 'fore I train a rifle on you!"

The sound of quarreling voices had brought his wife to the doorway, and the girl had hurried to her side. The woman's face was lined with worry, her shoulders thin and stooped.

A week later Steve had quarreled with his grandfather over riding to the schoolhouse dance to see Kitty Atkins. But old Abel's wrath had ebbed quickly. He had known he was facing the stone wall thrown up by love.

"Go see the girl," he said resignedly, "but don't forget the fight before us. For two years we've been fightin' that Mex, Ramon, but since the comin' of these homesteaders, he's run off our cattle in bigger bunches. And we know Jed Atkins rides too much at night for an honest man. Don't forget these things!" But even old Abel's clear vision hadn't foreseen this last stroke.

As he rode into Three Adobes, flanked by the three Rangers, Steve was thinking of what would happen if he was found guilty of this ambush killing. Captain Homan was known to favor a firing squad to a hang rope. The thought brought a derisive light to young Steve's eyes.

CHAPTER II

HOMESTEADER'S EVIDENCE

A JUDGE on his way to Austin was held over for Steve James' trial. They came early for the prisoner. The lad knew that word had been carried to old Abel of the murder charge and that before the sun was an hour higher, he would be in Three Adobes. He was glad the Rangers were moving swiftly.

His body tensed as he neared the adobe building where the trial was to be held. He had tried during the night to analyze the power that had made him surrender, to bring out for inspection the force within him that had battled for law and order. All his life he had hated the law, and then had come this reluctant realization of its bigness. Yesterday a force he had never felt before had battled down the beating drums of the James strain.

Could it be his father's blood? The thought brought angry flecks to the lad's eyes. He threw back his shoulders as though he were actually forcing a cloak from his body. Yesterday he had been under a spell, today he was free. When old Abel arrived he would know how to proceed.

Steve's breath cut short in his throat as he paused in the doorway and looked over the room. He had told himself that coming before Captain Homan was no different from coming before any other man, but he knew he was deceiving himself. His nails dug into his palms as he walked down to the table fronting the Ranger captain. This was his

father—the man who had ignored his very existence.

The judge had not yet arrived, and Captain Homan was attending to detail work. The gray-haired man who was known as one of the hardest fighters in the Ranger organization, did not look up. He continued writing. When he had finished, his glance lifted without haste to the prisoner before him.

He leaned back and went over the wiry body inch by inch. He studied the square James jaw, the wide James forehead. He saw the stormy eyes and the hair that was the color of rich earth. It was nineteen years since Stephen Homan had seen eyes and hair like that. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the corners of the table and he seemed about to rise. Then the dropped back and spoke without a tremor.

"You are charged with killing a Ranger. Are you ready to have your trial begin?"

His lips set harshly on the words and his eyes were merciless under iron-gray brows. His cheeks were cut with deep lines, not of age but rather of harsh years of experience.

"I am ready," young Steve answered, and the sound of his voice tightened the lines about the Ranger's lips.

"Your name?" Captain Homan asked, dipping his pen in the ink.

Fire streaked from beneath the lids of the youth as he realized that this man did not even know the name that had been given his own son. He was asking now without a shade of interest. Steve was suddenly afraid to trust himself to speak. The captain looked up.

"Your name?" he repeated in the same flat voice.

Steve rested his hands on the table and bent closer, the pride and lawlessness of old Abel bearing him up. "Stephen James," he answered, and did not again falter in his replies.

THE captain finished filling out the blank, his face unchanged. The judge from Austin bustled in, turned an alarm clock so it faced his chair and opened court, announcing that he did not want to waste too much time. The charge was read.

"Have you anyone to act as spokesman?" the judge asked Steve.

"I'll do my own talking," the youth answered.

"The captain will question both sides. I suppose you are pleading not guilty."

"I am. If I had wanted to kill that Ranger, I'd have got him face to face when he was at the ranch."

"Talk like that hurts your case," Captain Homan said emotionlessly.

The first witnesses called were men who had heard young Steve make threats against any Ranger that set foot on Running A ground.

Jed Atkins was summoned then. He told how he and his daughter had been riding through Salt Canyon when a shot had cracked from the brush and the Ranger had tumbled from his saddle. After a few seconds Steve James had come cautiously from the brush and approached the fallen man.

"He was mighty shaky when me and my daughter got there," Jed Atkins related. "And a heap taken back when he saw us. He was goin' through the man's pockets, but he jumped to his feet fast and kind o' smiled. He said from now on there would be one less lawdog howlin' to the sky."

The room buzzed. The homesteaders seated about the room exchanged quick glances and nodded meaningly. Steve remembered saying the words Jed Atkins had just

repeated. But Atkins did not mention how Steve had then branded the bushwhacker as a coward.

There came the pounding of hoofs on the quiet street of the town, and old Abel James and his foreman, Rock Tanner, threw down before the courthouse. Their horses were lathered from a long run.

The heavy-bodied owner of the Running A strode to the doorway and paused, his jaws squared, his old eyes stormy. Rock Tanner sided him, his own face like a block of stone. Both wore guns, and as they marched into the courtroom an involuntary quiet reigned for a moment. Power was still vested in both rock-ribbed bodies.

Captain Homan indicated that seats be given Abel James and his foreman, but the old rancher refused them with an impatient toss of the head. To further the refusal, he and his foreman squatted on their heels beside the door.

ABEL JAMES had not said a single word, but his presence pervaded the room, holding down the smiles of the homesteaders, whetting the glances of the Rangers.

The trial again got under way. Kitty Atkins was called. She did not look at Steve James as she moved to face Captain Homan.

"Your name is Kitty Atkins?" Homan asked.

"My name is Kitty Monroe. Jed Atkins is my stepfather."

Jed Atkins hoisted his angular body in surprise. His big hands clenched. "I've fed her and clothed her since she was four," he snapped. "She's gettin' mighty finicky of a sudden!"

The steely eyes of Captain Homan silenced him.

"Did you ride with your stepfather to the scene of this murder, Miss Monroe?" he asked.

"Yes." Her glance held to the Ranger's face. She was pale, but her head was high and her eyes steady beneath thick black lashes. Her strong, slender hands were locked together, and her lips seemed eager to answer questions.

"Did you hear a shot come from the brush and see James run toward the fallen man?" Captain Homan asked.

"I heard a shot. It came from the rims above the brush."

The quietness was acute. The girl's voice had been low but firm. Captain Homan leaned toward her.

"Are you certain that shot came from the rims above?"

"I am certain."

Jed Atkins rose from his chair. "A woman ain't got no gumption at a time like that, and besides she's lyin'. She's in love with young James!"

Captain Homan warned the homesteaders to be silent. He watched the girl closely as he asked his next question.

"Was James going through the pockets of the dead man when you reached the scene?"

"He was lifting the vest feeling for the heartbeat."

Whispers swept the room. Captain Homan's strong hands fastened on the edges of the table and he leaned forward. "What were the first words James said?"

Color climbed to Kity Monroe's pale cheeks and burned in two intense spots beneath her deep blue eyes. "I . . . I don't remember," she answered in a low voice.

The Ranger's voice reached out at her with new crispness. "You have had no trouble remembering up to this point. Think! What were his first words?" He leaned closer.

"Weren't they that now there would be one less lawdog to howl to the sky?"

The girl's lovely head lifted higher on her slender neck as she seemed to call on a reserve of strength. "I don't remember," she repeated.

Captain Homan studied the set-lipped determination that was holding her up. "Kitty Monroe," he asked, "is it true you are in love with the prisoner?"

She swayed back from him, and the homesteaders smiled knowingly to one another. Kitty's eyes changed, but they never left the Ranger's emotionless face.

"What does that matter?" she asked.

"It could help you to forget the things that weigh against him."

THE girl's locked fingers clenched together. "Steve James is innocent," she said. "He did not kill that Ranger!" Her voice was strong with conviction.

"We do not accept that as a truth," Captain Homan said. "It must be proved by the words of—unbiased witnesses. You are at liberty to leave the court, Miss Monroe."

Incredulity blazed in the deep blue eyes. "Jed Atkins is not unbiased. He wants Steve James destroyed. He—"

"You may go." It was the judge speaking and he glanced at the clock.

"I have some things I want to tell!"

Men stiffened to startled attention. Jed Atkins swayed to his feet only to be put down before he could utter a word. The girl's tones were ringing clearly through the room.

"Some of these men who call themselves homeseekers ride all night and pay no attention to their farms! They carry guns and—"

Captain Homan took her by the arm and turned her toward the door. "I will hear your information later," he said, not unkindly. "This is the trial of Steve James, not the homesteaders."

"But you are convicting him on their words—*their lies!*"

Her desperate control broke with the last two words, for she read in the grim face of Captain Homan the uselessness of her plea. For the first time her eyes sought out Steve James. They were dark with fear for him. Slowly she walked from the room and out to the hitching rack where her mother waited for her in an old single buggy.

The older woman's face was gray with dread as she reached down to help her daughter into the rig. As Mrs. Atkins shook the lines above the back of the old horse she was sobbing.

"Kitty, my baby!" she cried. "What have you done!"

CHAPTER III

DEATH SENTENCE

YOUNG Steve James was found guilty of murder. The judge from Austin sentenced him to death, glanced at the clock and rose to go.

"The law in Three Adobes doesn't seem of very solid parts," he said to Captain Homan. "This prisoner is a grandson of an important rancher, and the ranchers are standing together in this war. This boy's conviction is a victory for the homesteaders. Watch sharp the ranchers don't snatch him away."

He looked toward Abel James and his foreman as he said the last. They were standing quietly aside to let the room clear. Another rancher and two of his men that had gotten word of the trial had slid from lathered

horses just as the sentence of death had been passed. They, too, were waiting quietly.

"I'd suggest you call some extra help from among the homesteaders," the judge added. "That is if you expect to wait until sunrise to carry out the sentence. A quiet hanging within the hour, before the ranchers have time to gather, might be best in this case."

The frosty eyes of Captain Homan fastened on the judge's face and the gentleman shifted in slight uneasiness. It was well known that the Ranger captain favored a firing squad at sunrise. A hang rope had never been his way of dispensing death.

"Of course, you will use your own judgment," the judge said a little uncomfortably.

"It will be a firing squad at sunrise," Captain Homan answered.

Young Steve noted the businesslike way the four Rangers present stationed themselves. They had sized up the situation well, and were ready for trouble.

Old Abel stirred from his calm and his eyes were as cold as the muzzle of a gun. The fierceness of a great fighting race was in his stride as he advanced to speak with the prisoner. Rock Tanner was close at his side, whispering in his ear.

For a moment Steve was reminded of the bitter hate Rock Tanner, the old Running A foreman, bore this Ranger captain. Rock had never recovered from the shock of a lawman carrying off Nellie James. He had tried to build Steve's bitterness of the man to hate. As the old foreman whispered now, Abel James shook his head.

"It ain't time, Rock," he said in a low voice.

The foreman's hand kept returning to his holster and his eyes were hot against the face of Captain Homan. Abel stepped close to young Steve.

"Me and Rock will be ridin' along —fer now," he said. He looked hard into his grandson's eyes, and Steve saw the storm clouds banking thick.

The boy's blood leaped wildly to that unspoken message. A thin, twisted smile touched his lips. He nodded.

The Rangers exchanged glances as Abel and his foreman strode out. There was no relief in their faces, rather the tension seemed to tighten.

NIGHT closed down on the wide flat, wrapping the single tent with its lighted lantern in a shrouded hush. Sniption Creek flowed in a brush-lined course at the west extreme of the flat, the other sides of the smooth sweep was open country. That was why Captain Homan had selected the spot for his night camp.

The Ranger captain was not sleeping. His boots were muddy as though he had paced too close to the creek when he came to the tent to relieve the guard. Young Steve took no note of the change of sentries, the captain took no note of the prisoner. He took up the pacing before the thrown back flap of the tent.

A horseman coming at a gallop from the west was stopped by the guards at Sniption Creek. After a brief pause, a Ranger mounted and rode with the man to the tent.

"It's James," the guard announced to Captain Homan. "He says he's got important news for you. We've got his guns."

"Let him come," the Ranger captain answered, and the guard turned back to his station.

Abel James dismounted and approached the front of the tent. His

shadow bulged huge on the stretched canvas. Young Steve rose to his feet, his dark eyes quietly waiting. Captain Homan followed Abel James inside the tent.

"I am compelled to watch you," he said quietly.

"Kitty Monroe has been taken from her home!" old Abel James rumbled. "Packed off for fear she'd tell what she knew!"

Quiet waiting vanished from young Steve's eyes and a full born fury swept him forward.

"Stand back!" snapped Captain Homan. "Go ahead and talk, James."

"The girl's mother come to me for help. Jed Atkins claimed Kitty had gone off to marry a homesteader from up north, but that's a lie! Mrs. Atkins knew enough to link her husband with the Mex raiders that's been fattenin' on Texas cattle. Kitty knew them same things her mother did. Now the girl is gone."

Captain Homan's eyes remained shrewdly cold. "Why didn't this woman come to me?"

"Because she figured from the trial today when you wouldn't let the girl talk, that you was in with the raiders. I don't believe that, Homan. I'm givin' you a chance to bring that girl back."

Captain Homan's icy silence lasted until the last echo of old Abel's rumble had died. "I'll investigate," he said then. *"In the morning."*

Young Steve's anger filled the tent like exploded gas. "The morning! And by then she'll be in Mexico. It's them Mexes that have her. It's Ramon and his gang!"

The Ranger captain ignored him and spoke to Abel James. "Your attempt to strip the camp of guards is very crude, but the law turns down no cry for help. I'll send a man to the girl's home immediately."

THE old eyes of Abel James were bleak. "No man before ever accused me of lying, Homan. I can't kill you for it because you and your men have to go after that girl. She offered her life to try and save this lad here; she knew too well the type of man Jed Atkins was. You got to go *now!* You got to turn this boy loose and let him lead the pack. There ain't a sand ridge he don't know 'tween here and the border."

His grandson stepped close to Homan. "I give you my word to return with you when we have found Kitty Monroe." Wild Steve James was begging. His dark eyes were ablaze with pleading lights.

Captain Homan spoke directly to the boy. "I have to refuse your request. You are a dangerous gunman. I have men who can keep to the trail." The Ranger's eyes clung to his prisoner's. He seemed fascinated by the lad's eyes as he watched the somber shades die out.

"Would I be dangerous with my hands locked together?" Steve James pleaded. "And my word—I've never broken it!" He waited as a wild animal might wait to hear a key turn in the lock of its cage.

"I have to refuse you, James." Homan's face was set. He was utterly beyond the reach of words.

Abel James leaped and his big fist swung into the captain's face with all the power of his hundred and ninety pounds. With all his years of knowing men, Captain Homan had not expected this attack. He went down as a beef falls to the ax. Young Steve dropped one flap of the tent; the guards were fifty yards away. They might not have been watching the tent. Old Abel's breath wheezed in his chest when no stir arose. He had the key from the

captain's pocket and was unlocking the boy's wrists.

'Take my hat and jump my horse," he said. "Old Mex is waitin' for you at Arrow Bend with guns. I reckoned they'd take mine. The moon is washin' the flat clean as the bottom of a platter, but it's your only chance."

"We'll both leave," the boy said.

"Them guards would never let two men leave when only one rode up," Abel pointed out. "Steve, that girl risked everything for you. You got to go *now*. Two of us leavin' would mean a fight and we might both be killed. Then Kitty Monroe's last chance would be gone. You've got a job ahead of you; it's yours. I didn't have the wind nor the eyes for it or I wouldn't have wasted time comin' for you. My heart wasn't young enough for the job, Steve, my ears wasn't keen enough, my eyes are dull on the trail. We both owe this girl a debt. My part is to let you ride away without rousin' the suspicions of the guards." He laughed a little. "I ain't mindin' the job. I'll like settin' here watchin' Captain Stephen Homan open his eyes. For once Abel James has taken something from him."

CHAPTER IV

FIGHT AT DAN CREEK

STEVE JAMES examined the trail closely. It was that of three men and a led horse. His eyes hardened as he leaped back to the saddle for the ride that he knew would either save Kitty Monroe or commit her to the hands of the Mexican bandit Ramon.

Jed Atkins and the slim, hard-fighting outlaw were alike in danger if the girl were left to tell what she knew. But there was another reason why Ramon would be willing to risk this bold dash for Mexico. He had lost his head over many a pretty girl, and Kitty Monroe, with her dark pansy-purple eyes and translucent skin, had rare beauty.

Steve's blood stilled its wild racing as he steadied to the chase. He had to wipe everything from his mind except overtaking those three men ahead. He must get them before they contacted Ramon, for Steve did not believe the wily Mexican leader would associate himself with this play until the girl was closer to the border.

Mexicans as a rule were not stiff fighters, but Ramon was the exception. Steve had no fear of meeting him, but he did not want it to be when Kitty Monroe's safety was at stake. Well, he would handle those three men on the trail ahead of him and then think of Ramon.

Steve gave fleeting thought to his backtrail. The Rangers would be riding it long before this, determination casting their faces to iron. Captain Homan's reputation of always getting his man was at stake. Steve smiled grimly at the thought, as he doubled over the horn, his eyes on the ground.

The tracks he was following were beginning to lie open and fresh. Riding with his rifle across his lap, Steve struck Dan Creek where it was yet denuded of trees. Topping a slight rise, he took in the half circle of horizon before him. He looked into the distance as far as the white moonlight would last. Ahead was the dim line of a great brush patch. That was the spot from which he planned to make his attack.

Once within the brush, Steve followed by knowledge of the thicket rather than sign of the riders. There was only one way a party of four could go. Steve strained his eyes into the blackness where the moon's

light did not reach. When he heard a night bird fluttering back to the perch from which it had been disturbed, he knew he was close on his men.

He left his horse at the edge of Dan Creek and ran on afoot. There was an opening in the heart of the thicket some hundred yards ahead; and he thought the riders might pause here for a few moments of rest. They had covered a long hard trail, and Mexicans were adverse to wearisome riding. Steve smiled grimly to himself as the odor of boiling coffee reached him. When he was close enough to catch the hum of voices, he dropped to his stomach and felt his way carefully, creeping toward the camp.

A guard was stationed a little distance out on the trail, but Steve snaked by him after a short wait. The fellow was giving scant attention to his job, even calling now and then to his friends beside the low fire. As Steve came to a view of the opening in the brush, he counted four men in the circle of light. The guard behind him made a fifth, yet Steve had been trailing only three. Two must have been waiting for the party to arrive at this spot.

STEVE'S breath tightened as he watched a man step close to the fire to fill his cup with coffee. He was slender and muscular, and light shimmered off the silver of his belt and gun butts and caught at the metal on his hatband. That was Ramon. The Mexican bandit carried the cup toward a figure almost buried in shadows and his half-laughing voice sifted through the camp.

"What, not even a little sip to strengthen you for the rest of the journey?" There was no answer.

Ramon drew the cup back with a graceful gesture and lifted it to his own lips. "Never force anything onto a lady," he said softly to his men. "Next time she will ask me for coffee."

The camp responded to his mood with rough laughter.

Young Steve tightened his gun to his body. So Jed Atkins had bartered his stepdaughter to this outlaw! As the thought burned in his brain, he backed silently away from the light. He began a slow rounding to the spot where Kitty Monroe sat. Ramon strode about in the small clearing, and sometimes as he passed close to the girl he would toss her a word. He seemed more amused than angry that she did not answer.

"Don't be afraid, my little bird," he said in his low soft voice. "Be glad you are free of the hands of that pig, Jed Atkins. He worked your mother to death all these years. I'll ask nothing but caresses from those pretty hands of yours."

Steve was patiently working up on the horses. This was the most trying moment. One surprised snort and the camp would be at him with roaring guns, but he had to have a mount for Kitty Monroe. To hold these men back while she gained a safe lead was his aim. With five to face instead of three, and one of them Ramon, he could not hope to ride away with her, as he had planned.

He rose to his feet beside a horse, rested his hand gently on its neck and reached out to loosen the reins from a small bush. The animal rolled its bit noisily, but showed no fright.

A commotion breaking down the trail sent the men in camp scurrying for shadow. From every angle came the gleam of light on steel and Steve crowded close against the shoulder of the horse. A rider had been

Old Able suddenly swung on the Ranger captain and roared, "Get goin', Steve!"

stopped by the guard, and now the two men were running for the clearing. Both were speaking in excited voices. Ramon came forth to meet the new arrival, and Steve could see his body stiffen as he received the message that the newcomer shouted to him.

Jed Atkins had sent word that the prisoner had escaped. The Rangers were riding hell for leather on the trail. Nothing this side of Mexico was safe.

"Steve James free!" Ramon cried, all the softness gone from his voice now. His tones were harsh and determined as he ordered his men to saddle. "And a pack of bloodhounds are better on a man's trail than the Texas Rangers," he muttered as they kicked out the fire.

"But the Rangers do not ride our trail," the messenger declared. "They follow wild Steve James."

"Fool! And Wild Steve James follows us! He reads sign like he

does the pages of a book. For once that pig of an Atkins is right; Mexico is the only safe place."

Some of the Mexicans were among the horses now, and the camp was in pitch blackness. Steve led the horses he had untied to the spot where Kitty Monroe had been sitting. She was standing now. He touched her arm and spoke into her ear.

"Ride straight back over your trail! You'll meet the Rangers that way!"

He felt her body tense as she strangled a cry. He helped her into the saddle hurriedly, belted her horse with his six-gun and swung to face the men who were approaching.

THE camp echoed to the battle cry of a fighting Texan, a cry that had curdled Mexican blood for generations. It traveled through the thicket hot on the trail of flying lead. To the bandit crew it must have seemed that a dozen men had suddenly burst upon the camp.

Horses reared and men leaped wildly to avoid their hoofs. Wherever Steve saw darting lumps of shadow, he splattered bullets. Hearing Kitty Monroe crashing down the trail gave him courage. He fought like a madman, and soon a ripple of fear was trailing through high-pitched voices.

"The Rangers!" a man cried in terror.

The voice of Ramon cut at his followers. "It is but a single Texan! Kill him! I will go for the girl."

Steve sent two shots after the crashing horse, but he knew he had not scored a hit. Ramon was thundering away to catch Kitty Monroe. The Mexicans, relieved by their leader's words, settled to more skillful fighting. Steve began backing up swiftly, his only thought to get to his horse and pursue the bandit leader. The Mexicans came at him in a dash, but he threw them back with a hot fusillade. One hoarse cry was blotted out as though the throat had suddenly closed.

Lead whined over Steve as he crawled for the creek. His right shoulder was bleeding and his arm was beginning to numb. He slid his

short gun to holster and clung to his rifle with his left hand. He couldn't lose that, he must have it to bring down Ramon. A bullet flattened him to the earth as he sprang into thicker brush shrouding the creek.

He lay for a second, fighting off dizziness, then slipped down over the bank and dashed water over his face. That roused him enough to snap a shot at a streak of flame cutting down at him. A yell followed and a body splashed into the water. That was two of which he was certain and there might have been another back by the dead fire. With their strength cut down, the remaining Mexicans became very careful. They knew the rashness of closing in on a fighting Texan.

Revived by the water, Steve hurried up the creek. Not far ahead he heard a shot and hope warmed him. Maybe the Rangers had struck. But silence ate up the single echo, and a new alarm grew in Steve's heart. His mind was clear now and he bent all his efforts to reaching his horse.

When he came to the animal he understood that single shot. His sorrel was dead. As he stood with a chill eating to his bones, he heard two horses galloping toward him. They were yet in the clear, and as they came closer, Steve knew it was Ramon and Kitty Monroe. He lifted his rifle, but the outlaw was not taking any chances. He was riding on the far side of the girl and he was skirting the brush patch in a wide circle.

Steve turned back toward the camp with its dead fire. Where there were dead men, there should be empty saddles. But there were no horses left at camp. The Mexicans had given over the fight, collected the horses and gone. Steve stood, his head drooping, his rifle bracing him to steadiness. A few coals had survived the storm of battle, and Steve watched them struggling back to a stronger glow. A dead man was outlined on the ground. Steve sank to the earth and listened for hoofbeats.

The Rangers should be racing down the ridge to creek level before long. Captain Homan would have to believe in the kidnaping of Kitty Monroe when he read the sign about. Then he would go on to overtake Ramon and Kitty Monroe—and still not be late for the execution at sunrise.

CHAPTER V

WITHIN THE FORT

THE Rangers reached Dan Creek at last. Captain Homan was standing in the small clearing looking about.

"Hell has struck here," he said to the four men about him. "Two dead Mexes and plenty of hoofs tracks. What do you make of it, Poke?"

"I've got you covered!" Steve James' voice rang out warningly. He walked into the clearing as he spoke, his rifle at his bloodstained shoulder.

"Ramon is heading south and west with Kitty Monroe," he said. "There was too many of them for me to handle single-handed. My horse is dead. I got you under my sights, Captain Homan, and it's you I'm dealing with. Do you give your word to take me with you until this Mexican is caught? Do you swear it?"

"And if I do?" the captain asked quietly.

"Then I'll let you put the cuffs back on me."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll kill you for what you've done to Kitty Monroe. The sign is

here, let your man read it. I'm offering to deal fair."

The low fire was dying to scattering coals, the thicket blackened as its light faded. Not a muscle flicked in the Ranger's body. He was thinking. It showed in the concentration of his steely eyes.

"Put down your gun," he ordered finally. "I give you my word. Cowan, put the cuffs on this man."

Steve James let his rifle fall. He unbuckled his waist gun, then held out his hands. Captain Homan stepped closer.

"Dress his shoulder first," he ordered when he saw the blood on Steve.

"I've washed it out," Steve said brusquely. "No use wasting time."

In spite of his reluctance, a Ranger approached with bandages and quickly the wound was dressed. Steve, in a cold, clipped voice, told of the fight.

"I figure he's making for the old fort on the sand bottoms," he concluded. "He'll about make it by dawn. He'll be afraid to try the sand hills to the border in daytime."

Captain Homan himself snapped the iron cuffs back on young Steve's wrists.

"I thought Abel James was springing a trap when he came to the tent with a story of the girl's being taken by raiders," he explained. "I was wrong. The sign is clear. But tonight's chase will not alter your standing, James. You have been found guilty of murder."

Young Steve's head was high and his eyes hot.

"I wouldn't want my standing altered," he said, "if it meant accepting a favor from a damn Texas Ranger!"

The words sifted off into the thicket and were lost. Captain Homan ordered the men to saddle. He placed Ed Poke, his best man on the trail, in the lead. At Poke's side rode Steve James.

Ramon was keeping to his southwesterly course, riding hard. The trail lay fairly plain on the desert, but even without it his pursuers would have been certain, as the miles unfolded, of his destination. There was only one spot where he would consider himself safe.

At the old fort in sandy bottoms were many Mexicans, and a few renegade whites who lived within the crumbling walls because they offered shelter. An honest white man or a law badge was not safe in Fort Danby. Perhaps the heap of dried bricks had taken its name from a fork of Dan Creek, perhaps from an outlaw of an earlier day, Danby Corrillo. Nobody knew exactly, and nobody cared. It was a tough spot eighteen miles from the safety of old Mexico, and seething with hate for anything Texan.

THE Rangers came to the last of the sheltering trees on the fork of Dan Creek and pulled into a tight, low-voiced knot. The fort lay a quarter of a mile ahead, a gray oblong of strength. In this hour when most men were sleeping the heavy sleep preceding dawn, lights were bobbing here and there outside the inclosure. The moon was gone now and the darkness was dimly lighted by stars, but it was light enough to show horses picketed to graze.

"There's an army of Mexes outside those walls," said Captain Homan. "Ramon must have known." There was no weakness in his voice, just a statement of facts. The Rangers never counted odds when a job lay ahead. In a cool tone, Captain Homan began to outline plans

for throwing his little force against solid walls and perhaps a score of desperate men who would fight to the end against Texas Rangers.

Young Steve listened, trying to hate the tall straight figure, but anger would not come. His heart was thumping so loud it thundered in his ears. This was his father standing here, outlining the attack; that was a voice he had heard in his dreams. Even in the faint light, the movements of the hands were familiar. This man wasn't a stranger, he was his father. It was impossible to hate him. Steve recalled his grandfather's words.

"He loved your ma. Come what else against him, he loved your ma well. Grief does strange things to folks."

Old Abel, fighter that he was, had never wanted hate to linger in the heart of his grandson. "You got to remember your dad was a brave man," he often said. "Come hell or heaven, you got to remember it."

It was breathlessly hot even at this hour, and sound carried. There was movement outside the fort walls. Men were calling back and forth. It was evident that excitement had struck, and it had reached to the Mexicans sleeping outside the walls for coolness. Ed Poke had laid his ear to the earth and now he arose.

"Twenty or thirty of 'em, captain."

Young Steve felt tenseness tightening on his heart. Along with the other four men, he looked to the lean figure of Captain Homan.

"We have to know where the girl is before we strike," Homan said slowly. "There are thirteen houses within those walls and several sheds. To go up blind, would mean Ramon would make off with Kitty Monroe while we fought our way through. We have to have a man go ahead and locate the girl and discover the strength within those walls." He paused. "Is there one of you that volunteers for the job?"

"You've got your man, captain," Ed Poke grunted.

Steve James pressed forward. "I'll go! I know every house inside those walls, I speak Mex plenty good. I can go through that line if any man alive can!" His words snapped with conviction. He was not bragging, he was stating a truth. He shoved forth his ironed wrists. "I'm no good back here anyhow with these on; and you'll need Poke later. Give me a gun and let me get started.

The silence held for a moment. "It's our job to go through that line," Captain Homan said at last. "Poke will go, James. Ramon is as sly as the devil, and his men will fight hard."

"Ramon's just one more Mexican," Steve James argued. "I can't leave this job to anyone else. It . . . it means too much."

Captain Homan looked irresolute. Then he reached in his pocket for the keys. "Perhaps it is your job," he said. "You'd probably make it through when another man might fail." The handcuffs fell to the ground and for a second, Captain Homan rested a hand on young Steve's arm.

Steve drew back, his body stiffening. "Did you have something else to tell me?" he asked coldly.

Captain Homan's hand had dropped to his side. "I was going to acknowledge your courage."

"The Jameses have never been cowards!"

"No," the Ranger captain answered slowly, "*nor sneak killers.* A man who jumps five Mexicans, Ramon among them, single-handed, isn't one to burn ambush lead. Any information Kitty Monroe has will

be considered before your sentence is carried out."

STEVE JAMES gave no sign he had heard. He examined his gun as it was handed him and slipped it into his holster. Ed Poke walked a few paces with him.

"Good luck, kid," the Ranger said thickly as Steve melted into the mesa.

Steve James did not answer. He felt the tense quietness behind, the throbbing life ahead. There was a spot on his arm that burned. It was where the fingers of Captain Homan had rested.

Two sentinels moved about outside the walls of the fort, and they constantly cursed the loud calls of the men who had been sleeping on the flat. These Mexicans without the walls were not followers of Ramon, Steve knew. They only jeered when his name was used as a threat. Perhaps this was part of the Yellow Tom gang that was as much feared by ranchers as Ramon's band. Whoever they were, they all hated Texans; they would fight the same battle if Rangers were the foes.

The big gates to the fort were wide open, and men were moving in and out. As Steve edged past the sentinels, sometimes crawling flat on his stomach, then again walking boldly, he caught more and more of the life inside Fort Danby. Evidently the arrival of Ramon so close to morning, had driven away thoughts of sleep.

Steve lay close to the wall beside the gate and waited for a moment to enter. The lighting was shadowy, and if he did not get too close to any of these Mexicans swaggering about, the color of his skin and his clothes might go unnoticed.

He picked a time when three men had entered and the flat behind was clear. Sliding inside the hot walls, he flattened himself against the brown earthen side of a building. He edged along until, for the moment, he was safe at a corner.

The largest house in the inclosure, Mexican Al's saloon, was fanning with life. Men shouldered against each other to move in the space that Steve could see beyond the open door. The odds were greater than he had thought. Fort Danby was overflowing. Ramon flashed through the doorway once, his knifelike voice stabbing at the men within.

Coarse laughter met Ramon, and almost open insults. That he did not take up the words proved to Steve that the Yellow Tom gang was in force.

"Let the Rangers come!" cried a voice in broken Spanish. "I'd like to see a few of them damn Texans lookin' up to the stars without seein' them. It'd make my whiskey slide down about right!"

Steve crawled down narrow alleys between the squatty, tile-roofed houses. An old woman came along with something in her hand, and Steve leaned tight to the wall. When she stopped short and bent toward him he mumbled thickly in Spanish and she went on. He followed her soundlessly.

She went to a door that bore a lock, and when she reached the key from beneath her apron, Steve was at her shoulder. As the door swung open on a wick-lighted room, she felt his hot breath. She turned, and his fingers fastened on her arm. Stricken with fear, she obeyed his orders given in low Spanish.

STEVE closed the door softly and, still holding the old woman to silence with his iron grip, spoke softly to the listless figure in the corner.

"Kitty!"

Kitty Monroe, her face alight, sprang to his side. "Steve, you got here!" she breathed.

"Grab something to tie up this old woman's mouth with," he whispered. Kitty untied the old woman's apron and held it out.

"Angels and Blessed—" moaned the woman, but Steve's warning silenced her to a slobbering whisper. A gag was fitted to her mouth and she was placed on a stool. Her eyes showed that she feared death, and when Steve James promised that she would not be hurt if she kept silence, she nodded violently and crossed herself.

With the old woman gagged and bound, Steve held Kitty close for a moment. She lifted her face, met his lips in a long kiss, and drew away.

"I knew it was you at the brush on Dan Creek," she whispered. Her hands felt his face tenderly. "I was so afraid they had killed you. Now I can be brave. Whatever happens, we'll be together."

"Yes, we'll be together," he said. "The Rangers are waiting outside the fort, but the odds are long."

They locked the door and crept out the alley to the narrow street. Steve knew that for a time at least, the old woman's fear would hold her silent. The two slid along against the walls, working back for the great gate. Then when they were within a short distance of their goal, they saw the slim body of Ramon flash to view in a pool of light and heard his taut voice order the gates closed.

"There are Rangers on the fork of Dan Creek!" he cried.

Life belched from the saloon, and an outcry went up. "Rangers! Keep the gates open and let 'em come."

Ramon wasn't listening. He was ordering his men to positions of vantage.

Steve and Kitty moved slowly back toward the end of the fort. Steve was holding the girl's hand tightly. Neither had spoken since they had watched those gates close them in. Suddenly a door was thrown open so close to them that the dim oblong of light from the interior almost touched them.

A dark, little girl, whose beauty was lost in the storm clouds racing across her face, stood framed in the opening. She spoke sharply to a boy beside her.

"Bring Ramon immediately!"

She might have been all Spanish, for her hardly-controlled anger and her somber beauty hinted of Latin blood, but her speech was in perfect English. Steve and Kitty stood breathing. That oblong of light was like nails holding them to a cross. If the girl would only turn back into the house to wait, but she stood slim and defiant, her hands clenching and unclenching.

A few minutes later, steps came snapping from the front of the fort toward her door. Ramon swept onto the scene, his eyes blazing with fury. But for his anger at the girl in the light, he might have noted that a clump of shadows against the opposite wall bore likeness to human beings.

"Get inside and shut your door!" he ordered her.

"What is this I hear of a blond girl with eyes as blue as the heavens?" she cried at him. Her fierce anger made her careless of listening ears. From adobe two doors front came a laugh.

"Get behind those walls before I have your horse saddled and send you away!" Ramon said wrathfully. A stream of angry threats flowed at the girl and sent her swaying back in momentary alarm.

She held a pleading hand toward

him. "You haven't even been to ask how I am. I've waited for you, I—"

"You send for me to say *this* when the Texas Rangers are waiting to strike!"

"*Rangers!*" Her head lifted. "Then it is the truth! You have carried away a girl—a beautiful girl!"

"And if I have what is it to you? Your temper is beyond endurance. Go inside ad see that you don't send for me again."

RAMON spun on his heel and left her. She watched him a second, her anger spent, her lips trembling. Then she turned back into the room listlessly and closed the door. Kitty Monroe and Steve caught a sobbing breath as the oblong of light vanished.

But their relief was choked, for another pair of spurs was jingling toward them. This man came swiftly, halted a few paces away and snapped a query in a controlled voice.

Steve answered in low Spanish. He dropped the girl's hand, hugged his gun to his body and dug in his toes.

"Who hides in the shadows? Step out!" came sharply.

Steve James took a step as though to obey, then put all his strength into a leap. He crashed his gun along the man's head, but not before the fellow had let out a cry that rattled over the fort. Steve flung him down with a force that momentarily stunned the man, and leaped back for Kitty.

"In that door!" he whispered.

They landed inside the dimly lighted room, and from a couch rose the tall dark girl, her fiery eyes red with weeping. Color richened her cheeks when she saw the golden, blue-eyed beauty of Kitty Monroe.

"You?" she whispered.

Kitty stepped out before her. "Yes. This is my sweetheart come to take me away. You'll help us?"

"You are the Atkins girl?"

"Yes, my stepfather bargained with Ramon."

In the street beyond the door commotion burst. The voice of Ramon rode high.

"There's a spy within the fort! He's made away with the girl! Search every inch of these hovels!"

The girl grew deathly white as the beating anger in Ramon's tone jarred through the room. She threw out her arm, pointing a finger to the back.

"There's a ladder there leading to the roof! If you can make it to the wall you can escape him!"

CHAPTER VI

RANGER VENGEANCE

KITTY MONROE and young Steve made the last rung of the ladder as shouts burst beneath them. A guard at the rear wall sent a rifle ball humming over their heads and yelled their location to the fort. Steve pulled Kitty flat behind the tiles edging the roof and for a moment held her hand very tight.

"We have no chance to make the wall with rifles trained on us from the ground," he said. "We'll have to fight it out here."

Her fingers closed warmly on his. "I know."

"The roof! Bella's roof!" went up from below. "Take 'em from the saloon, it's higher!"

Steve flattened to the roof, trying to work out a plan of escape. The saloon was a taller building, but not enough to give the attackers much advantage; they'd have to show their bodies for accurate shooting. And there was a first thinning of the

night blackness in the air. A slim line of gray in the east heralded the dawn.

A man exposed himself on the saloon roof and Steve's rifle spoke. Others came over the ladder to join that first man, and again and again the rifle thundered from Bella's roof. It was like a deadly tune, a tune sharpened occasionally by curses and strangled yells.

Ramon was cursing, snarling orders, and threatening those who disobeyed. But there were several families living within that fort, and they were in a panic as the air shook with the thunder of heavy rifles.

"It's Ramon's fight; let him have it!" cried a voice.

Young Steve could hear them surging at the gate, yelling for it to be opened to them. Many men were nighting at the fort and had no notion of facing gunfire on the whim of a bandit leader.

"Open the gates!" came the thick-throated growl. "Open up!"

The fighting men in the fort were getting in order. Yellow Tom's men were for the moment falling in with Ramon; a thunder of rifles was the result. The gates were thrown open to let out the men whose fears, when they heard the name of Rangers repeated, had mounted to panic.

Steve pressed trigger as the head and shoulders of a man came to view on the roof before him. A wild cry answered. He swept up his short gun as the warning sob of Kitty Monroe told him another man was climbing the ladder to Bella's roof. The fellow threw up his hands and fell backward into the street. Kitty had reloaded Steve's rifle while he worked his six-gun; he hugged it to his cheek and turned back to the fight ahead.

From the opened gates came a yell that rose over the walls and rattled off across the sand hills. The battle cry of the Texas Rangers tore its way up the narrow streets, pierced through the heavy echoes of gunfire, thudded against the heavy walls.

THERE was a strange hush from the Mexicans as though fingers had clutched their throats. That battle cry had dried the blood in their hearts. Then the voice of Ramon swept to them.

"Wipe them out! Burn them down! Get these Rangers!"

Steve James grasped the girl by the hand and crawled for the ladder letting them back to the earth. He tried once to make the roof to the south that would let him get closer to the outer wall, but Ramon was still remembering the prisoners he had pinned to Bella's roof. Even in the fierce fighting that had followed the landing of the Texans, he had remembered.

"We must make it to the gate," Steve whispered, and held Kitty behind him as they hurried along the narrow street, bodies close to the sod walls. The battle was thick before them. Ramon had bunched his men in the saloon and from the front door and windows, they were spraying the Texans with fire. A new voice was riding over the old fort; the voice of Captain Homan. With reckless courage he was leading his small force against the heavy resistance. His men had only such slight protection as they could find in the open space to the front of the fort, but they were working forward.

Kitty Monroe's fingers clenched against Steve's and he knew she was thinking of the peril of that small body of men inching their way against such great odds. They were along the street opposite the saloon, and he drew her in through a doorway. He slid to a window that over-

looked a window in the saloon and lifted his rifle. He ordered her to stay close to a back door and, if he were rushed, to run for the great gate. He sent a shrill call at the Rangers as he pressed trigger.

"This way!"

He spattered lead through that window opposite, working his gun with an expertness that made it seem three men were attacking. His bullets sung an ugly tune among those Mexicans packed into the building. As they rallied to pour a reply back at his flame, the Rangers landed through the doorway at his back.

Captain Homan swept young Steve from the window, placed his own men at both doors and window. Then he took time to speak.

"Get the girl away while we hold them!"

The cool, decisive voice tingled through Steve's hot body; the voice actually seemed to touch him. Captain Homan's hand brushed his shoulder.

"You have the wild heart of the Jameses," he said, and for a second it was as though no guns were thundering. "They were great fighters. Take care of the girl."

CARRYING his hot gun with him, Steve led Kitty Monroe away from the fight toward the open gates. No one seemed to be watching as they slid through, out into the graying morning. Even Ramon had no time to remember Kitty Monroe, so fiercely were those Texas Rangers burning down on his men.

Steve found a horse. "Ride for help!" he told Kitty, and took her in his arms a moment. She clung to him.

"You're going back?" she whispered.

"Yes. They'll need me."

He kissed her again, helped her to the saddle and slapped her horse to a run. She was going for Abel James and the ranchers, but as he watched her slight form vanishing in the grayness, there was slight chance that they would arrive in time to help the little band of Rangers fighting so desperately in Fort Danby.

Young Steve slid back through the gates and worked toward the building where the Texans were surrounded. Ramon had spread his force now, and was raining death from three sides. The Mexicans were five to one. Steve hugged in close to the walls and waited for a chance to make his break. A lone man out here would stand no chance; he had to gain that building where the Rangers were. The grayness was growing thin, morning was in the east.

In a second of quietness when the Rangers could not mistake his yell, he leaped. It was only a few jumps, but lead was falling like hail as the sagging door was thrown open in his face and Captain Homan's rifle poured back a reply.

"You haven't a lick of sense!" he shot at the youth as the door was pushed to.

Ed Poke cracked a shot through the window and turned to smile. "Nope—not a lick, but you got somethin' that makes up for it."

With a shrill cry Ramon charged the house holding the Rangers. From a spot out of line with the firing, he cursed his men and urged them to break down the doors. He knew well that the forces inside those walls were greatly weakened by the firing of the last half hour.

With careful aim, the Rangers threw back the attackers. They were now too short of men to have a

guard at each door. Captain Homan and young Steve were watching the doors and also slamming lead through cracks in the east wall. Ed Poke was at the window. They could keep to no form, for they were fighting desperately for their lives. Two Rangers lay motionless on the floor, a third was still able to load rifles.

"They are weak as water!" came the triumphant cry of Ramon. "Break in the door!"

But fear of the dreaded organization made his men slow to obey. A Texas Ranger was a menace as long as he could lift a gun. They wanted to stay in shelter and slowly pick these men off. But Ramon kept constantly at them. Gradually they began to respond.

Ed Poke stumbled back from the window, blood pouring from a fresh wound. He went to his knees and felt for his rifle. The familiar feel strengthened him and he weaved to the east wall. The Mexicans sensed that fresh tragedy had befallen the Rangers and surged up a step.

Captain Homan snapped fresh loads to his six-gun, ordered Steve to the window, then jerked open the front door. With the Ranger cry shuddering against the walls, he leaped into the poised rifles for a sight of Ramon. Just once his gun spoke, then he was stumbling back to shelter. Young Steve caught him and kicked the sagging door closed.

"I got Ramon!" Homan said coolly as Steve slid him to the floor. "Now drive them to cover!"

CHAPTER VII

RETURN TO THREE ADOBES

YOUNG Steve was leaping from the east wall to the door. Part of it had earlier been gouged away by the blow of a heavy ram, and a Mexican must not be permitted a glance at the interior to see how weak the enemy was. Ed Poke was shooting slowly, but his aim was as careful and accurate as ever. Captain Homan had crawled to the east wall and lifted himself to a position where his rifle could work.

With their leader dead, the Mexicans fell back. Steve and Ed Poke followed them with lead. The first silence in an hour crept over the old fort. Echoes died. There was the sound of a few horses pounding away to the sand hills. Perhaps what was left of Yellow Tom's gang. Those who were left seemed to have lost their urge to fight.

Steve worked rapidly at Ed Poke's wounds. Then while Poke watched the front street, the lad turned to give aid to Captain Homan. Glittering lights filled the gray eyes of the Ranger as he looked at young Steve.

"There's lots of things familiar about you, James," he said, the tight lips growing tighter. "Your hair—your eyes. In color they are like old Abel's daughter."

Steve's fingers faltered. He sat back on his heels. "You are a brave man, Captain Homan," he said. "You just stepped out into hell to get Ramon. All I want to remember for the rest of this fight is that you are brave."

"Old Abel has told you about me?" An inner urge seemed to be forcing the captain to carry on the conversation.

"He told me never to forget you had courage."

The steel-gray eyes flashed. "He told you that? It's more than I expected." He leaned back against the wall. "I would like to be friends with Abel James, I would like to be friends with you. There is so much about both of you that brings Nellie

back to me. Did Abel ever tell you that I married Nellie James, his daughter?"

Young Steve's eyes met his and slowly a smile pulled at his lips. With stabbing certainty the lad realized that Captain Homan did not know he was talking to his son. Like many other people, he believed with the world that Wild Steve James was the offspring of old Abel's son. This steely-eyed man sitting propped against the wall had never bothered to find out what had happened to his own son, whether he had lived or died. The smile tightened about Steve's lips. His hands ceased their work.

"Yes," he answered with bleak emphasis. "Abel told me you were —my father."

Ed Poke whipped a shot toward the house across the alley and spoke to young Steve. The boy swept up his rifle and leaped for the door. He and Poke threw back the half-hearted attack. Captain Homan was swaying on his feet when Steve turned back, his face whiter than it had been before.

"You are Nellie's son?" he whispered. *"My son!"*

Steve nodded. "I'm old Abel's grandson. When you didn't trouble to find out if I lived or died, I took the name of James. I'm Steve James!"

A blazing light had set the Ranger captain's eyes aflame. "My son!" he whispered again, his glance devouring Steve's face. "Listen!"

Steve tried to turn away, but he could not. Against his will, he listened.

"Rock Tanner came to the Brazos with word of the death of my wife and son. He also brought word that Abel James forbade me to ever speak to him again. I thought I understood that command, for I knew the lawlessness of the Jameses. But I didn't! I fell into his trap. *Abel James stole my son!"*

TWENTY years were swept away in that instant. Stephen Homan was again the young Ranger suffering a death wound. "They took from me all that was left in life," he said fiercely. "I haven't lived since; I've just worked!"

Steve's heart was pounding until it seemed he must shout to be heard, but when words came they were little above a whisper.

"Rock Tanner lied," he said. "He lied to both you and old Abel. He came back with word that you did not want your son. He had always hated you for marrying my mother —that was his revenge."

The Ranger was swaying, the weakening power of his wounds upon him, but his eyes blazed evidence of the new life lifting in his veins. They traveled hungrily over the boy's face as Steve slid him to the earth floor.

"Your eyes and hair are Nellie's," he whispered, "but you're a lot like me, too. And old Abel called you Stephen, that was because Nellie wanted it and a James is too big to break faith. Stephen Homan, that was the way we had planned it!"

"The Mexes are moving out!" cried Ed Poke from the window. His voice was full of unbelief at his own words. "They're all hustling for leather!"

As the thunder of their departure softened, there came the pounding of hoofs from the direction of Dan Creek.

"The girl must have struck help," Poke cried to the men at his back.

Lathered horses raced up to the fort, and Abel James was among the

first to jump from his saddle. Three prisoners were among the ranchers, Jed Atkins and two Mexicans.

"We cut their trail as they was bustin' for the border," a lean-faced puncher explained. "They'd heard you fellers had Ramon cornered, and was makin' tracks for safer ground."

Abel James didn't speak until the noise had quieted some, then he drew close to young Steve. "We had a fight to take them," he said slowly. "Rock Tanner is—dead."

"Dead!" the boy cried, then the harshness that had glinted in his eyes at the mention of the old foreman's name faded. "Dead," he repeated softly.

Abel James looked past young Steve to the Ranger captain.

"Jed Atkins has squealed plenty tryin' to save his own neck. The homesteaders was in with Ramon, and that Ranger that was killed in Salt Canyon had stumbled onto some facts the day he was shot. It was a homesteader that done the job."

"I've felt it wasn't Steve for some time," the captain answered. Then he told Able James of the message Rock Tanner had delivered so many years past.

Old Abel stiffened, his big hands clenching. "He lied—he dared to do that to Nellie's son!" Then he remembered that Rock Tanner was dead. His big fists gripped tighter, but he said no more. He sank back on his heels and waited while horses were made ready for the return to Three Adobes.

THE square of shade spreading over the beaten ground before the Running A ranchhouse protected two men from the sun. Abel James was one, and he was watching Kitty Monroe as she kept close to young Steve, guiding him in his first walk since the fight at Fort Danby. The other man was Captain Homan, and he, too, was watching the pair.

Steve and Kitty came toward the block of shade, smiling across at the two men.

"It's good to see our wounded trying their wings," the girl said, her glance never straying for long from Steve's face. "Only don't get well too fast, Captain Homan, and begin to think of work."

The gray eyes of the Ranger smiled at the girl. There was no harshness in them now and she wondered why she had ever feared him.

"Duty is something that belongs to young men," he said. "Old men like Abel and I begin to like the shady spots and to think a lot about our comfort."

The shaggy head of old Abel nodded agreement. "I'm kind o' figurin' on buyin' me a knife and takin' up whittlin'," he rumbled. "I've about got the captain talked into the notion I need help."

They all smiled, and young Steve's glance went to the star on his father's coat. He knew now the force that had wrenched him from a course of bloodshed in this very block of shade. He understood now why he had handed over his gun to the Rangers and had gone quietly with them. It was his father's blood, he felt it now as he looked at that star, it had refused to give way to a wild thundering strain. It would never give way.

He lifted his glance to meet the eyes of his father. The graying captain smiled faintly, and Steve knew that he, too, understood.

THE END

TROUBLE AT MAGGIE GULCH

By RAY HUMPHREYS

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WITHOUT a doubt old Adolphus was behind the door, as the saying goes, when the brains were being passed out. But every time he gets struck by lightning, also figuratively speaking, he comes up smiling, happier and far better off than before. And to prove that look what happens at Maggie Gulch, Colorado, where him and I both are working at present and where sheep rule the roost.

Well, him and me—that is, old Adolphus and myself—are working for the Rosner Sheep Corporation, and if you know anything about woollies, you realize right now that we're working for the biggest layout of its kind in this section of Colorado. I guess the corporation runs more sheep than there are jackrabbits in Kansas, and they naturally have a regular army of herders, whole fleets of wagons, and more stub-tailed, long-brained sheep dogs than you could shake a stick at, working seven days a week for a whole month.

The herders are a funny lot. In addition to being crazy, they're a motley bunch, composed of seven-eleven different nationalities, of assorted colors and ages, and each, it seems, with plenty of empty storage room upstairs. They love sheep. They love the aroma of sheep. What more do I have to say?

We're all assembled, awhile back, at the headquarters of the outfit in Maggie Gulch, preparing to start out for the summer ranges—each man with his work team and wagon jammed tight with supplies, his working dogs and maybe a rookie pup to be taught the business—when a fellow named Ortega, who had worked for the outfit in previous seasons, comes rolling in from down Santa Fe way with some newfangled ideas. Somebody probably told them to him, but anyway he's got them and he's passing them out as his own.

"Us fellows aren't getting enough pay on this job," he cracks about two minutes after he checks in. "We ought to get an additional ten bucks a month, at least. Sheep are soaring. Wool markets are good. But we go right along working at the old scale that has been in effect ever since the War. It ain't right and it ain't fair—not even to the sheep. Why, if we were getting paid a higher wage we could be a lot nicer to the woollies. The difference would tell in their dispositions, too, and they'd feel better and look better and the quality of wool and mutton would be lifted!"

ME, I've heard clabber-brained sheepherders pop off before and I keep pulling on my pipe and sawing wood. But old Adolphus, who probably was more than satisfied with the company's wages and treatment up to then, seized the idea with both hands and proceeds to bulldog it all over the lot. He's all for it.

"Ortega is plumb right!" Adolphus says emphatically. "We're a bunch of human sheep working our hearts

out for a bunch of human coyotes, who are preying on our ignorance and good natures. Ortega, what do you propose doing to remedy the situation? I figure you got the answer."

"Sure I got the answer and it's the right answer," declares Ortega. He grins knowingly at all of the old-timers. "We'll form a committee and demand a new wage scale forthwith. We'll ask for ten bucks more a month. We all stand hitched in that demand."

"Suppose Rosner refuses?" asked Pop White, one of the less lame-brained herders. "What then?"

"We'll strike!" Ortega said promptly. "We'll strike, and not a doggone sheep will leave for the high ranges. We'll strike until Rosner gives in and gives us the additional wages. That's all!"

"That may be all for us," I interposes gloomily. "He can get a gang of new herders in here in two days from Denver and we can get our blankets and be out of employment for the summer or—"

"If we strike," interrupts Ortega, "we don't allow no low-down strike-breakers in Maggie Gulch. We get up picket lines, like they do in big strikes, and we keep 'em out. Further, we occupy the premises and the equipment and no new hands can do anything anyhow."

Ortega smiles in that superior way of his and continues: "We stage a sitdown strike in Maggie Gulch, see?"

Some of us knew what he meant, seeing we had looked at a newspaper now and then. But most of the old boys, including Adolphus, had never heard of such a thing, so Ortega proceeds to outline the thing for them. He tells them the idea originated in Europe somewheres, and that it is a very formidable weapon to use to swat the employers.

"I'm for it, tooth and toenails!" pipes up old Adolphus, as Ortega pauses for breath. "It sounds great to me. Sit, sit and sit—and win out in the end. Something like chess, maybe, or checkers—"

"Was it your mother or your father?" I asks Adolphus.

"Who? What do you mean?" he gapes.

"Who dropped you on your head when you were a baby?" I cracks, thinking to get a laugh. But there isn't any laughter. Everybody seems to be impressed by Ortega's suggestion, to be right behind old Adolphus in agreeing that the sitdown is the thing. So I shut up. What's the use in trying to argue with a bunch of dummies? If they had any sense they wouldn't be sheepherding woollies, anyway.

Ortega, once he is started, doesn't know when to stop. The first we know he's named a committee, told 'em what to say to Rosner and sent them on up to the big, rambling ranchhouse. They come back in a hurry.

"What did he say?" Ortega asks hopefully.

"He said 'NO'!" the committee choruses.

WELL, folks, that started the rumpus. Ortega appoints himself a general or president or manager or something of the sitdowners, and we all prepare for a long siege of squatting. Ortega explains that we don't have to get cramped or stiff or paralyzed sitting in just one spot. We can report at the mess shack for regular meals, sleep in the bunkhouse, do almost as we please—except leave the premises or do a lick of work. He exempts the cook and his assistant as

a matter of policy. All others, he says, are on sitdown.

Most of us are sitting along the sunny side of the bunkhouse when Rosner comes fretting and fuming to order us to get up and continue packing for the big start the next two or three mornings. Ortega gives him the sad news then.

"We're on a sitdown strike!" he says. "We don't budge until we get the extra wages the committee told you about, see?"

"Oh, is that so?" Rosner asks sarcastically. "Then you're all fired! Get your stuff and get off the place at once!"

"We're sitting here indefinitely," smiles Ortega, blowing smoke at the big boss. "You can't fire us, Mr. Rosner. We're just going to sit!"

Naturally Rosner blows up. But he might as well have saved his breath. It's a cinch that he and his office man can't bodily pick up and throw over the fence some forty-odd herders. After talking himself blue in the face, to no avail, Rosner spins on a heel and goes muttering back to the house.

We sit until lunch time and then we change our positions to the mess shack. Later we sit out in the sun again until supper time. Then we go back to the mess shack. After supper we sit out and mostly stare up at the sky where the Colorado stars are very bright and sharp, due to the high, clear altitude. We are all sitting there quietly, some of us smoking when Rosner shows up again.

"You're still sitting?" he asks blandly.

"You bet!" answers Ortega. "Tomorrow, too, we sit. And the next day. And the day after that. And forever, maybe, if you don't meet the demands our committee made on you. So—"

Rosner laughed, and it sounded like a fishy laugh to me.

"Well, I've gone on a sitdown strike, too," he remarked. "I'm going to sit and watch you—and, of course, while I'm sitting I don't pay nobody no wages. I've also ordered the cook and his assistant to sit down, too, just to make it a big family affair. Of course, with them sitting down, there'll be no meals around here. But we all need a good rest, I figure. I'll bid you all a good evening, men!"

When he was gone several of the boys grumbled to Ortega.

"Now what are we going to do?"

"Where are we going to eat—and what?"

"We'll get a committee out first thing in the morning to rustle grub and we'll have another committee cook it. I hereby appoint the cook and his assistant on the second committee," Ortega said briskly. The boys seemed pretty well satisfied, and old Adolphus speaks up to say that he thinks Ortega is right and doing fine and that he, for one, is going to stick right behind him forever and a day, come what may!

"I'm a hundred percent sitterdowner!" declared Adolphus loudly.

"Crazy sheepherder!" I says, under my breath.

THIS sitting down idea is the bunk!" yells another of the boys, one Morales, who isn't noted for good sense, either. "I say we ought to have more action! We ought to whoop it up like cowboys do when they go on a big spree. We ought to show Rosner that we're a dangerous outfit to fool with instead of calmly sitting down and knitting like a lot of old ladies!"

"That's right!" shouts Valdez, another herder who is plenty balmy.

"Let's do something exciting and

dangerous to show 'em that we sure mean business!" proposed Quijano, and with that a bunch of the herders, mostly those who first opened their peepers down below the Rio Grande, jump up and start yelling and clamoring for trouble.

Ortega tries to argue, but you can't argue with sheepherders. He's drowned out in the uproar. It is thereupon decided that, seeing the night is pretty chilly, a big bonfire will be started and there will be speeches made and maybe a parade around the fire, like the strikers did at the canning factory in Grant that time four years ago. Morales says to make matters look serious to Rosner the best thing to do is to use the nearest corral fence for the fuel.

"That's right!" somebody yells.

"Get the fence!" says another.

The only fellow who doesn't move off his haunches is old Adolphus. He sits tight, all mad at the idea of shelving the sitdown business.

"This sitdowning suits me!" he bellows. "And I'm going to SIT!" And sit he did, the old fool! The rest of us, we're moving around. The swarthy boys from below the Border, mostly, are ripping the creaking, weather-beaten boards off the nearest corral fence and feeding 'em into the flames of the bonfire with great gusto and a lot of chatter. Ortega is right in there with 'em pitching ball.

Me—I just keep moving so I won't look like a shirker. But I'm plenty against the idea of using the fence for the fire. It seems that Mr. Rosner is, too, because he apparently gets off his own sitdown long enough to rush rip-snorting to the bunkhouse to shout threats and pleas and other idle words at the busy little beavers removing his fence. But nobody listens to him at all, or, if they do, they pretend not to hear a word. Pretty soon Rosner goes away, muttering.

The flames are lighting up all the lower part of Maggie Gulch now, and the smoke is pretty thick. A lot of the sheep in the adjacent holding pens begin to "baa-aa" nervously, but nobody seems to hear them either.

Some of the townspeople come from down the gulch, thinking a bucket brigade is needed, but Ortega and some of the other fellows explain what it is all about and nobody does anything. Old Adolphus is still squatting against the bunkhouse wall, but it is getting pretty warm there for him and it begins to look like maybe his whiskers will be sizzling soon if he doesn't move off his sitdown strike. But he's a stubborn old cuss.

"I'm sitting until hell freezes over, boys!" he declares obstinately.

I had a good notion to tell him that he had his seasons jumbled up and that hell would probably be a crisp cinder and him along with it if he persisted in crouching so near that blaze, but I didn't say it because I knew it was useless.

The boys come back from the nearby mine with more fuel, and the fire leaps higher and higher. Ortega, who is bustling around like a bantam hen with a brood of young ducks, shakes his head cautiously and says that the fire is big enough for the time and not to put any more timber or anything on it until he gives the word.

The sheep are all blatting excitedly now, those in the nearer pens communicating their fright to those in the next pens and so on clear up the gulch. A lot of the dogs, are getting apprehensive over the situation and are barking their disapproval of the whole affair.

SUDDENLY old Adolphus hops up with a disgusted snort. Both frayed knees of his old trousers seem to be smoldering.

"I'm still sitting!" he cries angrily, "I'm just moving to another spot where it's more comfortable, that's all. I ain't giving up sitting!"

Nobody pays a bit of attention to him, not even Ortega. He steps out of the ring of light and vanishes. Rosner, who has come back down to remonstrate and try to put an end to the bonfire business, attempts to deliver a speech above the crackling of the flames, but the only ones who listen to him, it seems, are the gawking townspeople.

Ortega's fellow countrymen are piling up reserves of fuel and the rest of the herders are standing around dejectedly, each one, apparently, conversing with himself in a low tone of voice. Me—I'm telling myself aloud that all this is hokus-pocus and that it will all end up, likely, by all of us working all summer at no wages at all to pay for the fences and such that are fast going to ashes in the blaze.

"*Look out!*" whoops someone. "The bunkhouse has caught!"

Sure enough it has, and how! The flames have got a good start, apparently, on the near eaves and they're licking along the dry shingles like nobody's business. The bonfire is forgotten.

Rosner shouts for buckets and a lot of us herders, especially those of us not in Ortega's crowd, realize that a lot of woollies are going to perish if the fire spreads from the bunkhouse to the nearby sheds on the west. Who are we to stand by and see some of our old pals go up in smoke like that? We run for buckets. Some of the townsmen volunteer readily, too, and in about two minutes we got a real line of buckets operating over a distance of some two hundred feet from Maggie Gulch creek to the blazing bunkhouse.

But the dabs of water we toss onto the flames don't seem to do any good. The whole east end of the bunkhouse is going lickety-split now and a lot of us dumb herders suddenly remember that it is in that particular end of the building that we live and have all our wordly possessions stored, including what loose change any of us have. We redouble our efforts with the buckets and we quit talking to ourselves and start conversing with each other rather loudly and frankly.

"Who thought of this fire idea, anyway? I got a good overcoat in there!"

"Where's Ortega? My guitar is in there!"

"Yeah, and my new Navaho blankets are in there, too!"

But Ortega is nowhere in sight, it seems. Maybe, we decide, he and some of his pals are trying to get the sheep out of the closer pens, which, if true, is good and proper. But while we're sweating like horses and passing buckets as fast as we can, one of Ortega's right-hand lieutenants comes creeping up to me and Pop White. His eyes are sort of bulging. He says that maybe we'd better look out and move back a long distance.

"There's an open keg of powder in the storeroom in the west end of the bunkhouse," he mumbles, "and when it goes *poof* there won't be no bunkhouse or sheep or nothing else. You better run!"

"Powder?" yells White. "Open keg of powder. Where did it come from?"

"Juan and Pedro and I lugged it over from the mine," panted the Mexican. "We thought a little of it would help the fire, but when Or-

tega said not to put anything more on it we slipped it into the storeroom—"

Rosner, who is close in the bucket line, hears that and he lets out a wail like a dying ewe! He drops out of line and he comes over and grabs Pop White and myself by the arms. He jerks a thumb toward the west end of the store bunkhouse, which seems to be enveloped in flames right now.

"There's only one chance in a million!" Rosner gasps pathetically. "If you two boys will come with me we'll try to bust into that storeroom and grab that powder and carry it out. Otherwise we're all goners."

"Sure!" I agree dubiously; the storeroom end of the bunkhouse don't look any too inviting to me. But I start. And so does Pop, who never was a coward. With Rosner we reach the open door to the storeroom through a choking curtain of smoke that makes us cough and our eyes smart awful. There's an unholy glow inside and sparks and glowing embers are falling in that storeroom like tiny comets and meteors.

"It's suicide!" Pop yells, jumping back. "If that powder keg is open we'll—"

A cinder is burning a hole in my shirt at the shoulder, but I don't jump back because I suddenly sees a silent form in that whirling, shimmering haze. It looks like a man, maybe. I step closer, cautiously, and I see that it is a man, sitting there, stooped over, his head in his hands.

"*Hey!*" I shout, cupping my hands so I can be heard above the roar of the fire. "Hey, you—"

The figure moves and looks up and a thick, gasping voice replies

"I'm sitting until hell freezes over!"

IT'S old Adolphus, sure as shooting. I guess right then I showed how ignorant and crazy I really was. I didn't wait for no more. I forgot all about the powder. I jumps into that room that was crackling with flames and stumbles toward old Adolphus eagerly. Rosner is one gasp behind me. I seize Adolphus by the shoulders, roughly, but he jerks back.

"Leave me alone, you idiot!" Adolphus protests. "I'm still sitting—"

"And you're going to hatch out in hell in about another minute!" I screams at the lunatic. I grab at him again, but he wrenches loose and anchors himself more firmly to his seat.

"Take him, chair and all!" I howl at Rosner, who is wabbling in the smoke.

We do just that. We pick up the whole shebang and rush out with it. Old Adolphus is smoking in a dozen places, especially around his neck and shoulders. There is an odor of burned hair and I see, as I stagger out with him, that part of his cherished whiskers are gone, and that his eyebrows aren't where they used to be and that there are burned-over patches in his hair like the bare spots you see in the big timber sometimes where forest fires have raged.

Me and Rosner plunge and lurch and weave with our half-baked burden down to the little creek, and dump the singed old fool off his perch into the water—*splash!* Then we sort of glance down, casuallike, at his "chair" that we are still grasping and danged if it ain't the open keg of black powder! We drop it into the water fast. Meanwhile one of the town boys pulls old Adolphus out of the creek about fifteen feet downstream.

"You blithering idiot!" he howls,

running back up the bank to where me and Pop and Rosner are still standing, kind of foolishly. "You ruined my sitting record. I was sure sitting pretty, too—the only one in the whole dang bunch to stick to our agreement to sit forever, if necessary!"

I guess that's gratitude for you! Well, as I said, all sheepmen are crazy, but some are worse off than others. When the bunkhouse had burned to the ground despite the efforts of the bucket brigade, which saved the sheds and the sheep, however, some of us smarter herders got together and chased Ortega and his close buddies four miles over the range to Little Cub Creek. They were still going when we gave up the race.

When we got back to the rancho we find out that Rosner, who is about as batty as any herder, I guess, has given old Adolphus a raise in pay of ten dollars a month and further had added a two-months' vacation, which, Adolphus announces, he expects to spend in the Elite Bar down the canyon in Grant. As for Pop White and me and the rest of the herders who didn't leave with Ortega—well, Rosner has figured it all out carefully that we are to work all this season and six weeks of next summer without pay, to make up for the fire losses.

We're sagging in the knees at the news. Old Adolphus, on his way down to Grant, with coins jingling in his pocket, gives us a contemptuous snort.

"When I start to do a thing I finish it!" he says. "I was the only sitter-downer to go through with it to the end—and I got my raise!"

THE END

BEAR TRAPS

WHEN the first herds of domestic cattle began to replace the buffalo on the Western Plains, the stockmen learned that all the flesh-eaters welcomed the change. It was much less trouble for a mountain lion to drop on the back of a colt that knew nothing of the dangers that lurked in the trees beside the waterhole than to outwit one of the wary mustangs that had been trained by a watchful mother. Likewise the bear that roamed the foothills and mountain parks had no difficulty in knocking down a fat yearling for food, and this led to men being employed to hunt and trap predatory animals. Dogs that would follow a trail proved effective on lions, and the other members of the cat tribe; but traps were used almost exclusively for bear. These traps were of several different types.

Those sent out from the East were not strong enough to hold a full-grown grizzly, so blacksmiths were called upon to forge traps that would. The jaws of these traps had a spread of eighteen inches, with two-inch-long teeth that meshed when the jaws were closed. The huge springs were sometimes as much as a yard in length and could only be held down by a heavy lever. The whole affair weighed in the neighborhood of fifty pounds, in some instances even more than this, and, when set, was a distinct menace to every living creature on the range. The grizzly, however, is the most intelligent of all flesh-eaters, and very quickly learned the whereabouts of the traps and how to avoid them. Comparatively few of the older bears were ever caught in traps. In one instance a reward of a thousand dollars was posted for the scalp of a certain grizzly, but it was never collected.

GUNS AND GUNNERS

by Phil Sharpe

EVERY once in a while some chap writes us a letter concerning shotguns. He wants to know all about them—in a single article.

Brothers, it can't be done. Many a book has been written on the subject and many a question is still unanswered. But here are a few notes for shotgun users.

The shotgun is essentially a smoothbore weapon designed for use with a charge of shot. Very few firearms are as versatile as the modern shotgun. It can be used for various types of wing shooting, on both small and large birds, merely by changing the particular load. It can be loaded with buckshot, single balls, or the new rifled slug for use against deer and other large game at comparatively short ranges.

Shotguns are made in two general types, single and double barrel. The double-barrel gun is also made in two types known as the standard and the "over and under." In the former, the barrels are side by side; in the latter, one just above the other.

The single-barrel gun has numerous variations—single shot and repeater. In the single shot we have various low-priced jobs of the hammer type, bolt action, and hammerless; then comes the pump-action repeater, the automatic repeater, and the bolt-action repeater.

More important to the average man than the make of gun is the type of choke.

Every shotgun barrel made today, with a single exception, has a certain amount of choke. This choke merely means that the barrel is slightly smaller at the muzzle and at the breech end, thus bunching the shot together and giving better control.

If the barrel were bored without any indication of a choke, it would be known as a true cylinder and only Winchester makes the true cylinder gun today. This is practically useless as it frequently has a large hole in the center of the pattern big enough to permit the escape of a good size game bird.

The most common forms of choke are the improved cylinder, modified, and full choke. The average low-priced shotgun is made in full choke only, although some of these guns are available with the more open boring.

There is available on the market two forms of adjustable chokes. One of these is known as the Cutts Com-

pensator and the other the Poly Choke. Both are attachments for the muzzle of the barrel, and in attaching these, all traces of choke is reamed out of the original barrel and the pattern control obtained from the attachment itself.

The Cutts Compensator requires a special wrench to remove and install pattern control tubes. The Poly Choke is merely an adjustable nozzle, and for general purposes is more desirable. One merely twists the sleeve on the end of the barrel to obtain any desired choke. These are clearly marked. No tools or spare choke tubes are required and either of these attachments may be fitted to any form of repeating or single barrel gun. They are not made for double barrel weapons.

What gauge should you choose? This is a matter of more or less personal choice. Heavier loads are available in the twelve gauge which continued to lead in popularity throughout the United States. The sixteen and twenty are also popular, and these latter two are capable of taking any of our game birds. With the rifled slugs they are quite effective on deer and bear at the shorter ranges.

A question frequently recurring concerns cutting off the muzzle of a gun barrel, or barrels, to make the gun more portable through the woods. Don't do it!

As far as range and killing power is concerned, with comparable loads there is very little difference between a twelve gauge and twenty gauge. The difference in hole diameter in the barrel is a matter of but a few hundredths of an inch and a full choke or modified choke twenty gauge will pattern the same as a full choke or modified choke twelve gauge.

Another problem that is often put up to me is the matter of using these extra heavy modern loads in old guns, particularly guns with damascus, or twist barrels. Damascus, or twist barrels are readily distinguished by the important fact that they are not all one color. They have a "figure" of various wavy lines. Essentially, these barrels are not all steel but a mixture of soft iron and steel; thus in the finishing process they took different colors.

Some of the early damascus, or twist barrels were extremely expensive, but none of them are strong enough to handle the modern loads. American manufacturing discontinued using these barrels about the time that modern high-power loads such as the Western Super-X, the Winchester Super-Speed, the Peters Hi-Velocity and the Remington Express loads appeared on the market.

In my collection are four shotgun barrels, or perhaps I should say four pairs of shotgun barrels, which were blown up with these high pressure loads. In a couple of cases, the shooter was badly injured. My only recommendation is to use nothing but standard velocity loads in these old guns. This also applies to any other gun which may be in poor condition.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by JOHN NORTH

TODAY we have a letter from W. J. B., who is contemplating a move to a warmer climate. He says, "I would like to know if a man who doesn't happen to have the price of a yacht could go to Florida and get in on that good climate and sunshine, and at the same time still be able to make a living at his regular business, which is farming. I would like to raise a few crops and spend a lot of time fishing and wandering around. How about the West Coast of Florida, and the Everglades? Will you tell me something of what that part of the country is like?"

Well, let's cover the Everglades first, before we take up the towns. Since you like to ramble around and fish and hunt, perhaps you would prefer it this way.

The Everglades lie south of Lake Okeechobee. They are a great morass of saw grass, fringed by big cypress swamps and broad savannas covered with pine and palm hemlocks, salt meadows, and along the southern part of them, mangrove thickets.

The highest land in the Everglades is but a few feet above sea level, and when the rainy season comes even the dry spots become swamp land except a few humps on the highest hammocks.

Along the east and west coasts extend strips of higher land separating

the Everglades from the ocean and the gulf. Between these two strips and south of the big lake is all swampy land. It averages about fifty miles in width and contains over five thousand square miles of watery jungle.

Along the sides of the swamps there are beautiful farms which raise astounding crops of vegetables. The swamp land that has been drained is called muck land, and when properly handled is fine for raising things. Also, this muck raises a lot of sugar cane.

The streams in the Everglades are teeming with fish and game. There are more kinds of fish in these waters than you can find in any similar amount of water anywhere. You need a very shallow boat for navigating the Everglades, and the dugout canoes which the Seminole Indians push along with long poles, instead of paddling, are ideal.

And now for the West Coast. If you are going to drive down to look the country over first, take Route 5 from Lake City and High Springs, or go down Route 23 from Ocala to Plant City. You can run off on side roads and look over Cedar Keys, Yankeetown, Crystal River and Homosassa. The first three of these towns offer you good fishing and hunting grounds.

Running on down, you can investigate Inverness, Brooksville and Dade City, all inland, and all offering opportunities for fresh water fishing. If you like this section and decide to settle here, you will find farms raising Japanese persimmons, grapes and other such fruits, as well as fine garden truck.

Clearwater is another popular town farther down, and is known as the place "where it's springtime all the time." There is vast acreage of piny woods back of it for your hunting and fishing, plenty of salt water fishing and swimming, and the temperature averages 72 the year round. Farms in this vicinity specialize in citrus fruits.

And then you come to the most famous of all the West Coast cities, St. Petersburg, which is a favorite haunt of elderly people from the Middle West, who like quiet and simple pleasures and good climate instead of the high speed action of the east coast resorts. And the city has done everything in its power to make their stay a happy one. They have several thousand of the famous green benches on the sidewalks where people flock to "just set," in the sun. The amusements are keyed to their tastes, and the band concerts and singing sessions are famous. This is where age rules the roost, and it is comfortable and restful place to live.

There are many other towns farther down South, and all are worth visiting, but the ones I have mentioned seem to appeal most to people who want to settle down there the year round. The temperature is not too hot to be comfortable, and life goes on easily and smoothly.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING

by J. A. THOMPSON

THERE are tricks to every trade, little short cuts by which the experienced man can quickly solve a problem that appears difficult and mysterious to the novice. Prospectors know lots of these practical tricks, particularly those that aid them in the field identification of minerals.

For instance, hardness. A simple thing like the relative hardness of two minerals that otherwise resemble each other closely may be of prime importance in determining which mineral it is.

As an illustration, take the case of real gold and fool's gold, or iron pyrites. Gold is a comparatively soft mineral. You can scratch it with a copper coin. Fool's gold is much harder. *It* will scratch the copper coin, instead of vice versa. A good steel knife is needed to scratch a piece of fool's gold. This hardness test alone will differentiate definitely between iron pyrites that only looks like gold and gold itself.

William A., of Waterbury, Connecticut, brought up the interesting subject of checking the identity of mineral finds by their hardness when he asked us in a recent letter to explain how relative hardness is determined.

Well, Bill, in the first place mineralogists long ago decided on an arbitrary scale of hardness. Each point in the scale from one to ten designates the hardness of a certain mineral, and minerals with the same scratch resistance, which is what is really meant by "hardness," are given the same number on the scale.

Talc, the softest mineral, is number one, diamond, the hardest is number ten. In between these two are the other graduated numbers. The higher the number, the harder the mineral. Each mineral will scratch those below it on the scale.

The full scale goes like this: 1—Talc; 2—Gypsum; 3—Calcite; 4—Fluorite; 5—Apatite; 6—Feldspar; 7—Quartz; 8—Topaz; 9—Corundum; 10—Diamond.

That is the scale mineralogists use, and because hardness is generally a very uniform characteristic in all specimens of a definite mineral, it has been accepted as one of the safest guides in their identification. However, most prospectors don't have a sample of all those ten minerals with them in the field, against which they can check the hardness of their finds. So some of them use the following more common minerals for testing relative hardness:

1—Graphite; 2—Ordinary salt (a chunk of rock salt); 3—Galena, or lead sulphide; 4—Copper pyrites; 5—Black iron oxide, or limonite; 6—Magnetite, or magnetic iron oxide; 7—Quartz; 8—Spinel; 9-10—A piece of artificial carborundum.

Incidentally relatively few minerals are harder than quartz, with the exception, of course, of the valuable gem stones such as diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds. Rubies and sapphires are next to diamonds in hardness. That as well as their beauty when polished is one of the prime reasons for their high value as gems.

Sometimes a prospector doesn't have samples of *all* the minerals in either the first or second hardness table in his field kit. Does that mean he cannot make hardness tests? Not by a darn sight. The chances are he has with him items of varying hardness which will do very well for rough checking the hardness of a mineral specimen. In many cases rough checking is all he will need to classify definitely a suspected mineral when other obvious characteristics such as color, form, heft and so on are taken into consideration.

What is more if you haven't these "short cut" items for hardness tests along with you, it is easy enough to get them before you start.

Your fingernail, for instance has a hardness of about two or little better. In other words it will scratch gypsum, talc, graphite, salt crystals and all other minerals below two in the hardness scale. A copper cent has roughly a hardness of four. A cheap knife has a hardness of between five and six, a good knife's hardness is between six and seven. The average file has a hardness of seven or about the same as that of quartz. And a piece of carborundum will take care of any mineral you may encounter harder than quartz. You can also add a tin can to your hardness testing equipment. A tin can has a hardness that is better than four, or your copper coin and yet not quite as hard as five, or a poor knife.

See what we are driving at, Bill? Hardness tests that started out as a fairly complicated mineralogist's method of checking the identity of mineral specimens have been simplified so that without losing their efficacy they can be readily used by prospectors in the field. And without the use of any more "scientific" equipment than your own fingernails, a copper coin, a pocket knife, a tin can, an old broken bit of file and a little piece of carborundum.

Just tricks of the trade, Bill. We'll divulge some more in other forthcoming articles.

Not New Mexico, but Nova Scotia is where T. Y.'s interest centers. From Portland, Maine, he asks where the gold country of that Canadian Province lies. Mainly in areas outside of Halifax, T. Y., running from thirty to ninety miles out from Halifax itself.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

THE HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

SUMMERTIME is here once again and that means that very shortly all over the country there will be an almost general exodus from hot, dusty cities to mountains and seashore where the air is fresh and cool. To Norman Wosencroft, who is an English lad living in the city of Liverpool, England, our great West, "where," as he says, "fresh air *is* fresh air," beckons invitingly. He's a little too far away, though, to just pack up on his vacation and take a pasear out there, so in his letter below, he asks all you Pen Pals who live out West to write and tell him about it—and we second the motion.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is an English lad calling for a few Pen Pals from the wide open spaces out West where fresh air is fresh air and not contaminated with smoke and fog as it is in a city like Liverpool. So please give my letter a chance to gather its reward and start the ink splashing. I will answer all letters and tell you all the news from this side of the world. I am twenty-eight years old and am keenly interested in amateur dramatics.—Norman T. Wosencroft, 4 Garfourth Road, Liverpool, England

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Life begins at sixty for this widow—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if there is room in the Hollow Tree for a lady who is sixty-one years young? I would like to receive picture post cards from every State in the Union and from foreign countries, and I will send cards in return.—Mrs. W. M. Kirkpatrick, Solway, Minnesota

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Private Smith will tell you all about Hawaii—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely young soldier in the United States army who longs for Pen Pals. I am nineteen years old, enjoy all sports, especially swimming, and my hobbies are collecting snapshots and writing letters. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps, so come on all you boys and girls and drop a lonely soldier a line.—Private Francis Smith, Battery F, 8th Field Artillery, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, T. H.

All those past forty write to Phyllis—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a widow and would like to hear from Pen Pals between forty and fifty years old. I'm very lonely up here in Medford. I was born in Texas and lived in Southern California for seventeen years and can tell all who are interested some interesting things about California.—Phyllis Stevens, 16 Ashland Avenue, Medford, Oregon

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Lewis will welcome mail from all Western Story readers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I enjoy Western Story Magazine and wonder if I could have a little space in the Hollow Tree? I am a young male student nurse in the Texas State Sanatorium. I love the West and would like to hear from Western Story readers from everywhere. My hobbies are collecting stamps and coins which I will exchange as well as snapshots. I promise to answer all letters. Lewis E. Donnell, Box 1081, Sanatorium, Texas

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Violet and her sister are good sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please find room to publish this plea from two young Australian girls seventeen and eighteen years old? We are both very fond of outdoor sports, especially basketball, and are both good sports. We would like to hear from Pen Pals living all over the world and promise faithfully to answer all letters and exchange

snapshots so let's hear from you, one and all.—Violet and Ethel Christensen, 61 Charters Lowers Road, Rising Sun, Lowensville, Queensland, Australia

Albert is a young cowhand from out Montana way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and enjoy all sports, especially boxing and riding in rodeos. I will exchange photos with all who write, so come on, everybody, and write to a young cowboy in good old Montana.—Albert Benner, Box 85, Zurich, Montana

Eunice will exchange snaps—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like to correspond with Pen Pals living in the West or down South. My hobby is collecting snapshots, and I enjoy all outdoor sports, especially horseback riding. I also enjoy dancing and singing. I will gladly exchange snapshots and will answer all who write, so come on, pals, and send your letters this way.—Eunice Bloomfield, Rt. No. 1, Box 376J, Beaumont, Texas

From Nova Scotia comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like some Pen Pals from all over the world. My favorite sports are skating, swimming and hiking and I also enjoy reading. I promise to answer all letters and will tell you all about Nova Scotia, so come on, boys and girls, don't fail me.—Fraser L. Matheson, High Street, Pictou County, Nova Scotia, Canada

Gardening is her hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-eight years old, a widow, and I would very much like to hear from Pen Pals around my age. My hobby is gardening and I enjoy traveling. I'll be waiting to hear from you, so come on, all you Pen Pals, and write to me.—May Bell Parks, 4006 Hamilton Avenue, Detroit, Michigan

Pen Pals, don't disappoint Leslie—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading Western Story Magazine for eight years and now I would like to join the Hollow Tree. My hobby is collecting pictures. I will exchange snaps with all who write, so come on, pals, and don't turn down a lonely friend.—Leslie Robbins, Hardinsburg, Kentucky

Mable has lots of time on her hands to write letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been working, but I was laid off recently and get mighty lonesome with so much time on my hands, so will you help me get some Pen Pals real soon? I would like to hear from everyone everywhere. I enjoy outdoor sports, especially horseback riding and swimming, and my favorite indoor sports are dancing and reading. Here's hoping I get lots of answers.—Mable Campbell, 2505 Alabama Avenue, Selma, Alabama

These two CCC boys want some news—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are a couple of CCC boys looking for some Pen Pals. Virgil is twenty-two and I am nineteen. We've both been in the corps for over a year now and enjoy it very much except that we don't get enough news from the outside world. We would like to correspond with boys and girls living in the Southern States.—Virgil Faube and Don Carlos, CCC Co. 4707, Outing, Minnesota

Frances is especially interested in cowgirls and cowboys—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a high-school girl sixteen years old and would like some Pen Pals from all over the United States between sixteen and twenty-one years of age. I want especially to hear from cowboys and cowgirls. I live on a small farm, enjoy all outdoor sports, and like music. I promise to answer all letters.—Frances Sample, Rt. No. 3, Ashdown, Arkansas

Joe sends this plea to new and old friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you forgotten me? It's been three years since I sent you a letter. I got hurt soon after I wrote you, had a nervous breakdown and was in the hospital for a long time. I'm at home now and feeling my own self again. I'm living on a farm in the Adirondack Mountains and it's wonderful. All I need to make me completely contented is a few Pen Pals. Hope my old Pen Pals will remember me and write again, too.—Joe Mahar, Box 314, Broadalbin, New York

Adelaide has a very generous offer to make—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please publish my appeal for Pen Pals from anywhere and everywhere. I can tell all who are interested about the West, the mountains, the border country, and the desert. My hobby is collecting postmarks from all over the world. I am also interested in bead, leather and metal work. If anyone is interested in collecting match covers, et cetera, I'll gladly save some and send them on. Here's hoping I get carloads of mail.—Adelaide Fabler, 322—5th Avenue, San Diego, California

Ersol has a surprise for all who write him—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-two years old and would like lots of Pen Pals. I am fond of outdoor sports and am musically inclined. I have traveled quite some and will be traveling in the East this coming year. I am a Gospel Singer now singing and leading all songs in evangelistic meetings. I have a surprise to send to all who write me, and I promise to answer by return mail.—Ersol G. Davison, Home Missionary, c/o Ennis Hawkins, Rattan, Oklahoma

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

Part Three

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

BY WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

The Story So Far:

THE presence of Deputy United States Marshal Nick Vulcan in Vista Wells, a little town on the United States-Mexico border, seems a rather unwarranted intrusion to the townspeople and to Sheriff John Laramie. There had been some trouble in the Centaur country, but that was a purely local problem, having to do with the rustling of cattle belonging to Gage Hammond, the most important rancher in that section.

When Sheriff Laramie's deputy is dry-gulched before he has a chance to divulge important information which he had uncovered, Vulcan takes over the investigation. With the help of Larry Crockett, a young rancher, Vulcan pins the killing on one of Gage Hammond's men. He is about to question the bushwhacker, when the man, losing his nerve, pulls his gun on Vulcan, who kills him.

Larry Crockett and Gage Hammond have been bitter enemies for some time. Crockett believes Hammond plundered his ranch during a several weeks' absence, and Hammond likewise accuses Crockett of rustling cattle from him. Since he cannot prove his charges against Hammond and is unable to get Sheriff Laramie to press them, Larry for some time has been trying to even the score himself.

Learning that Hammond expects a gold shipment on the Capitol City stage, Larry, wearing a disguise and a mask, holds it up and takes the money from Steve Riker, Hammond's man. His plans are worked out carefully to give him an alibi, but when he later meets Joan Bristol, Sheriff Laramie's niece, who had been on the stage, she notices a scratch on his hand and recognizes him as the bandit.

Larry is forced to admit that he held up the stage, but when he explains his motive to Joan, she agrees not to expose him. However, Steve Riker is also suspicious. He goes to the Crockett ranchhouse and, finding no one at home, breaks in and discovers the clothes worn by Larry when he held up the stage.

CHAPTER XI

CORNERED

IT was not more than eight o'clock the next morning when Larry Crockett rode into Vista Wells. Hot sunshine streamed along Main Street, making the shadows between buildings appear cool and black. Early as it was, a few cow ponies were tethered at hitch racks, and knots of men were scattered about the jail building. Others were gathered about the rear of the jail where steel bars had been sawed from the window of one of the cells.

Larry noticed there were no loungers hanging about either the Warbonnet or Cloverleaf Saloons. He pulled his pony to a walk and proceeded along Main Street. As he was passing the Vista Wells Hotel, a hail reached him from the porch, and Nick Vulcan rose from a chair and came out to the road. Larry pulled his horse to a halt.

"Hi yuh, Nick," he greeted, grinning. "Say, where can I get some good metal polish?"

His mind occupied with more serious thoughts, Vulcan was thrown off guard for an instant. He frowned. "Metal polish? What kind? What you figuring to use it for?"

"My tin cup," Larry explained gravely. "You know, sitting around on the corner, the way I do, it gets exposed to air. The finish is commencing to tarnish somethin' terrible, and—"

"Think that's funny?" Vulcan glowered.

"Uh-huh," Larry admitted, grinning.

"Well, 'taint," Vulcan snapped. "You just arrived, so you can't be expected to know the bad news. Otherwise you wouldn't be runnin' off at the mouth thataway—"

"What bad news?"

Vulcan looked quizzically up into Larry's face. "I suppose you come in to swear to the necessary papers against that Buck Buchanan you brought in last night," he said.

"Sure, why not?"

"You've had your trip for nothing," Vulcan grunted. "Buchanan's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"How in hell should *I* know?" Vulcan demanded with some exasperation. "Maybe he's gone searching for tin cups. Don't ask me."

Larry sobered. "You mean he escaped from jail?"

"I don't mean nothing else."

Larry whistled softly, his gaze shifting down the street, then back to Vulcan. "How did it happen? Somebody hold up Sheriff John?"

Vulcan shook his head. "John didn't even know about it until he woke up this morning. Since Howie Moran was killed, Laramie's been sleeping on the cot in his office instead of at the hotel. Well, he woke up this morning and discovered Buchanan's cell empty. Somehow Buchanan must have got hold of a saw and cut the bars on his window. I just come from the jail. John is all broke up."

"It's a hell of a note," Larry said. He looked serious, then asked, "Hasn't the sheriff made any move to get on Buchanan's trail?"

Vulcan shook his head. "He ain't no idea which way to go. Buchanan took his horse, of course. The sheriff put it in the corral back of the jail last night before he went to bed. Lord only knows where Buchanan has traveled to by this time. I'd sort of like to get on that coyote's trail myself but, after all, it's Laramie's job, if there's to be any trailing done."

"I reckon," Larry mused. "Guess I'll get on along and see John."

"I'll go with you," Vulcan said promptly.

"I thought you just came from there."

"You got any objections to me going back?" Vulcan demanded in an almost belligerent tone.

"No. Suit yourself." Larry shrugged and touched spurs to his horse.

Vulcan frowned, started to follow Larry on foot, then paused. He crossed back to the hotel and sat down on the porch. Five minutes later he arose and started in the direction of the sheriff's office.

BY this time Larry had dismounted in front of the sheriff's office and made his way, on foot, around to the rear of the jail. Several men stood about, talking and eying a window from which three bars had been cut. Two or three men nodded to Larry. He replied absent-mindedly to their greetings and walked toward the pole corral a few yards away.

Only one horse, Sheriff Laramie's mount, was in the inclosure.

The usual smile was absent from Larry's face as he left the rear of the jail and turned his steps back toward the sheriff's office. As he reached the entrance he saw Nick Vulcan.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Vulcan asked.

Larry shrugged his shoulders and started on.

Vulcan looked narrowly at him. "Did you see something I missed?" he demanded.

"I'm no law enforcer," Larry said indifferently. "It's not my job to read sign on escaped prisoners."

"Damn it, you did see something," Vulcan accused.

"If there's something to see, you got eyes to see with as well as I have," Larry countered.

Vulcan muttered an oath and strode toward the corral. Larry watched him and saw Vulcan scanning the earth for sign in the vicinity of the corral. Larry smiled grimly and went around to the sheriff's office. The door was locked.

From inside came John Laramie's voice: "Who is it?"

"It's me, John—Larry Crockett."

Footsteps sounded inside. A key turned in the lock and the door opened to let Larry pass. Closing the door, the sheriff turned back to his desk and dropped into his chair. His face was lined with worry, his eyes bloodshot.

Larry didn't say anything for a few moments. He seated himself on the cot along one wall, pushing aside the rumpled blankets, and commenced to roll a cigarette. The scratching of the match, along one boot sole, seemed to prompt the sheriff to speech.

"Well, the situation looks pretty bad, doesn't it?" he said bleakly.

"It's not too serious," Larry declared.

Laramie shook his head and sighed deeply. "It's too serious to suit me. Larry, that's the first time in my career a prisoner ever escaped. I've nothing to blame except my own carelessness. I'm getting old, I reckon. I'm thinking of resigning my office."

"You haven't any idea how he got away, John?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I should have kept closer tab on him. Somebody passed him a hacksaw, from the outside."

"You know that for certain?"

LARAMIE nodded, his gaze glued to the desk before him. "I found the hacksaw in his cell. This morning, shortly after I discovered the escape, Chuck MacCrimmon came in to complain that somebody had broken into his hardware store last night. When I showed him the hacksaw I found in Buchanan's cell, he recognized it as being from his stock. I found the sections of the bars Buchanan removed on his cell cot."

"Funny nobody heard him. There's dang tough steel in those bars, John."

"I should have heard him," Laramie said bitterly. "I'm just an old lunkhead. Once I get asleep I don't hear nothing. I'm too old for this sheriffin' job, that's all there is to it."

Larry's heart went out to the elderly sheriff. He'd known John Laramie as long as he could remember, knew him as a good man and an efficient law officer. He and Larry's father had been close friends. In the old days they'd fought the 'Paches, side by side. "You're taking this thing too hard, John," Larry said gently. "A few days ago you were suggesting that I leave this country. Suppose I give you the same advice. Get away from here. Go some place and take a good rest. Forget this law business. If you need any money, let me know."

"It's not money that's stopping me," the sheriff said, shaking his head.

"What is?" Larry asked.

The sheriff ignored the question.

He was looking at Larry with sudden suspicion. "For that matter, I'd like to know just where you'd get money to lend me if I asked for it."

"That's my problem, where my money comes from," Larry retorted. "But getting back to cases, John, it'd do you a heap of good to take a long vacation."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," Laramie admitted. "Just as soon as I can get somebody to take my place, I—"

The door was abruptly pushed open, and Gage Hammond strode in. He hesitated a moment when he saw Larry, then said, "Found any clues as to Buchanan's escape, John?"

Laramie shook his head.

"Maybe Crockett here can produce some," Hammond sneered. "He figures himself as plenty smart."

Larry laughed softly. "I might surprise you, at that, Hammond."

"Meaning just what?" Hammond demanded.

"Exactly what I said."

"If you've got any information regarding Buchanan," Hammond snapped, "you'd better pass it on to the sheriff. I've got a hunch Buchanan will be plenty dangerous, at large. He should be captured before he kills somebody."

Larry started to laugh. "You've changed your tune since last night, haven't you, Hammond? You were almost ready to give him a job. Now you say he's dangerous—" Struck by a new thought, Larry paused, then went on, "Don't tell me Buchanan got away with his guns, too. He had a rifle and six-shooter."

The sheriff suddenly raised his head. "That's my fault," he stated, grimly self-accusing. "I said I was getting too old and careless for this job. You see, Larry, when I put Buchanan's horse in the corral I left his saddle out there. His belt and six-shooter was hung on the saddle-horn. His rifle was in the boot on the saddle. It plumb escaped my mind when I came back here to turn in. So, when Buchanan got out of his cell, there was his horse and guns waiting for him. I'm just a blame careless old fool."

"Oh, I see," Larry said slowly. "But don't go blaming yourself, John. Everybody makes mistakes."

"I'm through making them on this job," Laramie declared.

"What do you mean by that?" Hammond asked quickly.

LARAMIE rose to his feet. "I'm resigning my office. I'm going to get out of the country for a spell. I'm too old for this job—"

"Bosh!" Hammond said shortly. "That's all foolishness, John. You're needed in the Centaur country. I won't hear of you resigning. If necessary I'll start a petition to the governor to keep you in office. Hell! Vista Wells couldn't do without you. Now you get that idea right out of your head unless you want me to go to a lot of trouble, to keep you here. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Laramie sank back in his chair. He sat gazing out of a window to his left. "No, I wouldn't want that," he said reluctantly. "But you see—you see—" His voice dwindled off into silence.

"It's funny none of the other prisoners heard suspicious sounds last night," murmured Larry.

"There weren't any other prisoner in the jail," the sheriff explained. "I just had two men in, for disturbing the peace. I let them out shortly after supper last night."

"That explains a lot," Larry commented.

Hammond looked sharply at Larry and was about to make a remark when the door burst open suddenly and Nick Vulcan, followed by Steve Riker and Spanish Grant, pushed into the office. Vulcan looked triumphant; Riker and Grant wore nasty grins.

"What you two doing in town?" Hammond asked his men.

"You'll learn in a minute, boss," Riker answered. Grant nodded.

Vulcan's eyes bored into Larry's. "It looks as if your tin cup will get rusty from now on, Crockett," he said. "You're not going to get a chance to use it where you're going. I've got the deadwood on you at last."

Larry didn't speak for a moment. His eyes went quickly over the three men who had entered. Steve Riker was carrying a canvas sack which Larry immediately recognized as his own property; it bore on one side the stenciled Bridle Bit emblem. What in time were these men up to? What did that sack contain? Thoughts flashed swiftly through Larry's mind, but none of them solved the problem.

"You'll have to explain yourself, Nick," he said easily, "before I consent to throw my tin cup away. What's on your mind?"

"I'm arresting you, Crockett," was Vulcan's grim reply to that.

"For what?"

"For the holdup of the stage yesterday," Vulcan snapped.

"I suppose you've got proof?"

VULCAN laughed harshly. "We got proof, all right. The man who held up the stage wore Oregon breeches and a plaid shirt. Last night, Riker went to your place, Crockett. He found the clothes you used in the holdup—"

"That," Larry interrupted coolly, "explains a broken lock on my bunkhouse door. I knew some coyote had been prowling. But he never found what you claim." This last was pure bluff.

"Don't stall, Crockett," advised Vulcan. "We've got you cornered. You'd better start talking, if you expect to explain things—or else make a complete confession."

Larry's facial expression didn't change. Wishbone must have left those togs where they could be found easily. Larry's heart dropped. What could he do? He tried to frame an alibi, but nothing came to mind. Hammond, Riker, and Grant were grinning triumphantly. Vulcan's features showed dogged relentlessness. Only on Sheriff Laramie's face was there any expression of pity.

"Think fast, Crockett, think fast," Vulcan said harshly. "This is one tight you can't get out of."

Without thinking, Larry backed a step. Instantly Vulcan's gun was out, covering him. "Hold it!" he warned. "Don't try to shoot your way out of this, Crockett. I got you dead to rights."

"Aw, throw the handcuffs on the buzzard," Spanish Grant growled. "He'll confess all right, if you handle him right. Then we'll find out who those hombres were that helped him."

Larry's hands had gone into the air at the first sign of Vulcan's gun. "I'm not drawing, Nick," he said quietly. "You know, you may think you have proof that I pulled that holdup, but I wouldn't take Riker's word if I was you. I see he's carrying a sack with my brand on it. I don't remember anybody saying the holdup man wore a sack."

"Don't try to be funny, Crock-

The two men headed for the corral, unconscious of the hulking convict who stalked them.

ett," Riker sneered. "We got you in a sack, all right, and you won't get out—"

"And another thing," interrupted Larry, "how do I know Riker has got the clothes I was supposed to be wearing when I pulled your danged holdup?"

"They're the same togs, all right," Riker declared harshly. "I'll swear to them—and so will Sad Sam and Buckshot, when they see 'em. There ain't no doubt of it."

"You going to come across with a confession, Crockett?" Vulcan demanded.

Larry was stalling for time. "Think I should?" he asked, grinning, though inwardly his heart was beating like a trip hammer.

"You can't laugh this off, Crock-

ett," Vulcan snapped. "Come on, tell the truth. I'll do my best to get you a light sentence if you'll come clean now. You'll save us both a heap of trouble."

Sheriff Laramie cut in, his own troubles forgotten in Larry's difficulties. "Look here, son," he said kindly, "if you held up the stage and they've got proof on you, there's no use bucking them. Vulcan's got the government back of him. If you're guilty, you'd better confess. I'll put in a good word for you with the governor and see if a light sentence can't be arranged."

"Thanks, John," Larry said, "but I don't see any reason for confessing to that holdup. All I've heard is that Riker went to my place and stole some clothing. How do I know, how does Vulcan or anybody know, they're the same clothes that holdup man wore?"

"Don't be a fool, Crockett," Vulcan rasped. "We've got you, and you know it—"

"Have you seen these togs, Nick?" Larry cut in.

VULCAN hesitated. "No, I haven't seen them yet. Riker and Grant just rode in. They found me out back of the jail. But Riker's told me his story. He'd be a fool to make a statement he couldn't back up." He paused, then turned to Riker. "Open up that sack, Riker. Crockett insists on being stubborn, so I suppose we'll have to humor him."

"Right." Riker nodded with a grin that was almost a snarl. He jerked loose the draw cord on the canvas sack and thrust a hand inside. Suddenly the grin left his face and was replaced by a look of puzzlement. He paused, then slowly drew out a cheap denim cap with a shiny black peak. His mouth fell open as he gazed at the cap in his hand.

"What the hell!" Vulcan exclaimed.

"Where . . . where did this cap come from?" stammered Riker.

Vulcan whirled furiously on the man. "What kind of a whizzer you trying to run on me, Riker?" Without waiting for a reply, he jerked the sack from Riker's grasp and held it upside down, shaking its contents to the floor. Sudden silence descended on the sheriff's office as a coarse suit of penitentiary denims and a heavy pair of hobnailed boots fell from the sack.

Riker stared speechlessly at the objects on the floor. Spanish Grant's mouth hung wide open, his eyes glued to the prison garb that had dropped from the sack.

"I . . . I don't understand," Riker gasped.

Larry relaxed as a long inward sigh of relief passed through his body. He didn't know what was back of all this, but he didn't care, so long as it didn't incriminate him.

Vulcan ripped out an enraged oath. "Damn you, Riker, what you trying to pull on me? You'll explain this, or—"

"Take it easy, Nick," Larry advised coolly. "Your blood pressure will start poppin' over If I were you, I'd question Riker plumb close. His mind don't seem quite right. He might turn dangerous. Furthermore, sheriff, it might be a good idea to arrest him for robbery. He's admitted taking something from my place. I recognize that sack as belonging to me. Nick, you've made your play, but it wouldn't stick. You'd better make a new start."

CHAPTER XII

THE HUNTED MAN

FOR weeks, Scar-beak Malone had lived in a state bordering on mingled exhaustion and terror. Ever since the night—it seemed ages ago—when he had escaped from the huge gray stone penitentiary up north, he had lived in continual fear of recapture. Sometimes he had wondered if escape had been worth while.

Looking back now, Malone, a graying, narrow-chested man with a jagged, livid scar across the bridge of his broken nose, saw the actual escape from prison as comparatively simple. It was what had followed afterward that, at times, made him regret ever having departed from the penitentiary.

Up there in the "big house," not far from the Canadian border, Scar-beak Malone was on the records as a long-termer. Years before, there'd been a bank robbery in which several employees had been killed. All the bandits, except Malone, had made good their escape, carrying the loot with them.

Malone had been captured and sentenced to death. A retrial had commuted his sentence to a seventy-five-year term in prison.

Malone had been game about it. No matter how they tried, the authorities never succeeded in persuading the "long stretcher" to reveal the identity of his companions in the robbery. Too, Malone was a rather simple, believing man, and when word reached him via the prison grapevine that his friends on the outside were working to get him out, he believed it, and kept silent. He didn't know the money they'd stolen had long since been spent and the gang scattered.

Eventually, however, Malone grew restless as his sentence dragged on. He was getting along in years now. Word still reached him, about once a year, that friends were laboring for his release and that his share of the stolen money had been saved for him. Yes, Malone actually believed that, when Gage Hammond, from his haven of security down near the Mexican border, had such messages smuggled into the prison. Hammond, of course, was interested only in seeing that Malone kept his mouth shut regarding past history. For all Gage Hammond cared, his old pardner in crime could rot in the penitentiary. Probably Malone wouldn't have been so trusting, except that, with the passage of years, he had become what is known as "stir simple," a condition not far removed from actual half-wittedness.

One day had come one of Hammond's periodical notes, telling of the ranch in the Centaur country and of the job that awaited Scar-beak Malone when he was released from prison. It wouldn't be long now, Hammond had written: the governor was studying the case. Scar-beak, poor simple fool, believed it. But it started him thinking of freedom and the open range and of a horse between his legs, and he began to grow a trifle impatient.

MALONE had been in the prison so long that no one ever thought of him escaping. "The poor old stir louse," they called him. They made him a trusty and put him on kitchen duty. And then, one night after dark, a truck load of supplies had been delivered to the mess building.

It was raining; the guards were a bit careless. No one noticed when Malone seized the opportunity he had been waiting for. He crawled

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under a pile of tarpaulins in the empty truck. Ten minutes later the truck had passed through the prison gates to the outside world, and Scar-beak Malone was free.

He didn't stay long with the truck. Five miles from the penitentiary he dropped, unnoticed, from the rear end and darted into the brush at the side of the road. Then he commenced working his way south.

The escape was discovered that night, of course, and the chase was on. The bloodhounds were called out. Through timber and brush country, down ravines and up steep bluffs, Malone fled. Once a guard spotted him from afar. A hail of lead flew dangerously close before the fugitive once more slipped out of sight.

He was hungry and thirsty most of the time as the days and nights slipped past and the chase continued. He narrowly avoided capture on three different occasions, but always his steps trended toward the south.

An occasional farmer's wife gave food and, quaking with fear, urged him to leave. When he had departed she always hastened out to the fields to inform her husband, and again the chase would be renewed.

Sometimes he would steal a chicken at night from some lone homesteader. He'd learned not to approach buildings in the daytime, for his prison clothing always gave him away. God! If he could only get some different clothing. He lived like a wild man on berries in the woods. He was harried from day to day; always the pursuers seemed about to close in, and always, miraculously, Scar-beak Malone avoided capture.

At night he shivered in his coarse prison denims and often longed for his cell blankets. His face and hands were scratched from thorny brush; his lips parched and dry. The heavy, hobnailed prison shoes made blisters on his feet. The blisters broke; travel became more torturous.

In due time Malone crossed the State border and breathed a trifle easier. But it was always the same. If he approached a farmhouse or homesteader's shack, he was immediately recognized by his clothing as an escaped prisoner. Immediately the hue and cry arose, and once more he went scurrying off into the brush like some wild, hunted creature.

Malone grew to hate the clothes he wore and became obsessed with the desire to get other togs. But where to get them was the problem. He was penniless. He didn't dare enter a town to beg. In an attempt to disguise the coarse denim clothing he smeared himself with mud. It didn't help much. *Prisoner* stuck out all over him. However, the chase was less pressing now, and Malone decided it was best to go on as he had, living on food he could steal, wild rabbits he could trap, and so on, until such time as he could locate Gage Hammond.

ONE night Scar-beak Malone's luck turned. He emerged from the brush to find a freight train standing on the tracks before him. Why it had stopped there he never knew, nor cared. He didn't hesitate to crawl up between two of the cars. In a short time the train moved on. Luckily for Malone, it was headed south. When it slowed for a town, a hundred miles farther on, Malone slipped off

in the darkness. After that he set his course of travel along railroad right of ways. Rides were frequent.

In time he found himself half-starved and with his nerve on the ragged edge in the Centaur country. Here again he was forced to live like a wild man until he could locate Gage Hammond's place. He listened outside bunkhouse windows at night and picked up stray bits of conversation. Often he heard Hammond's name mentioned, but he could never locate where the man's ranch was. And he didn't dare ask anyone.

He also heard a Sheriff John Laramie's name mentioned. That brought back old memories. He'd known a John Laramie in the northern country. He had in fact been in a gun fight with Laramie once and Laramie had won. Malone wondered if this could be the same man. If it was, Laramie would have no love for the escaped prisoner, Scar-beak Malone. Malone told himself he'd better move carefully until he located Gage Hammond.

And so the ex-convict concealed himself by day and wandered about the range by night. Food was scarce in this country. There weren't many chickens down this way, and even the rabbits seemed harder to capture. Twice, in the middle of the night, Malone crept into Vista Wells and found the garbage bucket back of one of the town's restaurants. That helped a lot. He carried away as much discarded food as possible, concealing it inside his shirt. If he could only locate Hammond, he thought, this misery would be ended. But somehow he never seemed to see the man.

Eventually, one night, Malone crept out of the brush to approach a group of ranch buildings he thought might be Hammond's place. He'd seen cattle close by, that day, bearing a Circle H brand. He wasn't sure, but he thought that was Hammond's iron. Still, he didn't dare ask anyone. It would be best to hang around in the hope of seeing Hammond.

Lights shone from a bunkhouse. Scar-beak stole near and peered in through a closed window at the back of the building. He saw bunks at one end with men sleeping in them. Two men sat talking at a table in the center of the room. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but one thing was certain: Neither of them was Gage Hammond.

Malone was about to withdraw when he heard a rider approaching. He slunk down in the shadow. In a short time he heard voices at the other side of the building. He gathered that the newcomer's name was Steve Riker. He called the two men in the bunkhouse Spanish and Lippy.

After a time, Malone raised up and again peered through the window. Riker was laughing, seemingly very pleased about something. Riker was holding a canvas sack in one hand. Malone lost a bit of his caution as he pressed his nose against the window until the livid scar across its bridge turned white. His furtive eyes glistened as he saw Riker draw clothing out of the sack. There were boots, a sombrero, a plaid shirt, and a pair of striped breeches. Just what Malone needed!

THE fugitive's heart began to beat faster. That was a dandy shirt! And those breeches didn't look worn much. No wonder Riker looked so pleased. They were better clothes than Riker

had on. Probably somebody had given them to him.

A sudden wave of hate for Riker swept through Malone's narrow chest. It wasn't right that he should get those clothes, when Malone needed them so bad. Hell! Wasn't there no justice in the world? Malone trembled at thought of wearing the clothes. If he only had that striped pair of breeches and the plaid shirt. He'd look just like other men then. He could get rid of these damn prison clothes that stood out worse'n a brand on a cow critter.

Dammit all! Malone told himself he simply had to have those things. He needed 'em worse than Riker. It was only fair that he should have 'em. Malone's heart beat faster, and his hands commenced to tremble. He wondered how they'd fit him. He could pull that sombrero down low and his gray hair wouldn't be noticed so much. Hell! He wouldn't even look old. Yep! And with those Oregon breeches on—

Malone's thoughts came to a halt. Tears almost came to his eyes. A wave of disappointment sent a choking sensation into his throat. For a moment, a brief, happy moment, he had imagined he really owned those clothes. But they were Riker's, after all. Malone clenched his fists with impotent fury as he racked his brain for some scheme by which he could secure the clothing.

His heart sank as he continued to gaze through the window. Riker was putting the things back in the sack now. There went the striped breeches, the plaid shirt slipped from view. Finally, all the objects Malone desired so fiercely were replaced, out of sight, in the sack, and Riker pulled the draw cord tight. Light from the window shone bleakly on Malone's pallid, disappointed features as he watched Riker set the canvas sack on the floor a short distance from the door.

Malone sank to the earth below the window, suppressing the weak sob that rose in his throat. The clothes now seemed forever beyond his reach. His despair changed to sudden fury. By God! Those clothes should be his by rights. He needed 'em—worse'n Riker ever did.

"And, dammit!" he muttered. "I'm going to have 'em."

There was no telling how long he crouched below that bunkhouse window, scheming ways of securing the clothing. He heard the voices inside the building, but couldn't determine what they were saying. After a time he heard Riker step outside and lead his pony down to the corral. In a short time the man was back. The door slammed behind him. Shortly after, the light in the bunkhouse was extinguished.

AN hour passed. When all was silent within, Malone crept around the building and tried the bunkhouse door. His heart was beating madly, but he was determined to steal that sack of clothing. He cursed inwardly with impotent fury; the door refused to open. It was bolted from the inside.

Malone paused, trembling all over, debating ways and means of getting into the bunkhouse without being detected. Suppose he yelled "Fire!" Perhaps they'd all come running out of the bunkhouse, then he could slip inside and steal that sack.

In the next second he decided against the plan; the ruse would soon be discovered and he'd be caught. It might go hard with him

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if Hammond wasn't there to protect him. Riker might be mad enough to shoot him when he learned Malone had stolen his new togs. No, that wouldn't do.

Malone left the bunkhouse door and stalked aimlessly about the silent ranch buildings. If there was only some way of sneaking into the bunkhouse, but there didn't seem to be any. What in the devil did they have to lock that bunkhouse for? He made his way back to the rear of the building and cautiously tried the window through which he'd been gazing sometime before. That, too, refused to budge.

Dejectedly, Malone dropped to the earth below the window and gave his mind over to a study of the situation. How long he sat there he didn't know, but after a time he arose and noticed the false dawn creeping along the eastern horizon. "Reckon I'd better get back in the brush," he told himself. "No telling what might happen if I was found here and Gage wa'n't around to say a word for me."

He was about to leave the ranch when he heard the sound of galloping hoofs. Once more he slunk down in the darkness. The rider came nearer, then pulled up before the bunkhouse with a loud, "Hello, the house!"

Voices sounded inside the bunkhouse. Malone heard the door open, then Grant's voice demanded, "What you want, hombre?"

"I'm looking for Spanish Grant," the newcomer said.

"I'm him. What's on your mind?" Grant's voice sounded wary, suspicious.

"I brung a note from Gage Hammond. My name's Buchanan—Buck Buchanan."

"Oh, yeah, sure." Grant's manner relaxed somewhat. He turned back from the door. "Just someone

bringing a note from Gage," he called to those inside. "Nothing important, I reckon, to get you hombres out of your bunks."

There were sighs of relief from inside. Snores from two or three were resumed almost immediately. By this time, Scar-beak Malone had crept around to the corner of the building where he could hear what was going on. It was too dark to see much, just the shadowy shape of horse and rider. After a moment, Grant stepped out of the bunkhouse in his sock feet, after having hastily drawn on his pants.

"Where's the note?" he asked.

A RUSTLE of paper passed between the two, and Buchanan stepped down from his saddle. Grant scratched a match, looked first at Buchanan, then read the note. When he was finished, he dropped the match on the ground and swore emphatically. "You messed it up, eh?"

"It wa'n't my fault," Buchanan growled. "I done my best. It was just luck that that Wishbone Herrick scut happened to be in that vicinity and got the drop on me. I'd got Crockett, too, only for my gun jammin'—"

"Alibis don't go on this outfit," growled Grant.

"That's up to you," Buchanan grunted. "And I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not. Hammond said you'd take care of me. I got his protection. He said something about you was to give me directions for reaching the hide-out—"

"Yeah, he said that in his note," Grant cut in.

"I don't know why he couldn't tell me himself," grumbled Buchanan.

"We got to be careful who gets in there," Grant explained. "You'll meet some of the men we got stationed in our hide-out. They got orders not to let nobody in, less'n they got notes from both me and Gage. That gives us a double check on who arrives in case anybody should get an idea of forging one note."

"I see what you mean. Well, give me your note and—"

"I'll send my note along with Gage's. That'll get you in."

"I'd like to borrow a saddle, too," Buchanan said. "I busted my cinch on the way here."

"I don't rightly know if we got an extra saddle for borrowin' purposes," said Grant. "I'll get a lantern and we'll go over to the blacksmith shop. We keep the things for repairing our rigs over there. I reckon we can fix you up in a short spell."

Grant stepped back into the bunkhouse. In a moment he emerged with a lighted lantern, and he and Buchanan started for one of the buildings some short distance away, Buchanan leading his pony behind him.

Once more the bunkhouse was bathed in gloom. The receding rays of the lantern in Grant's hand disappeared in the blacksmith shop. A sudden thrill ran through Scar-beak Malone This time the bunkhouse door was sure to be unlocked.

He peered around the corner of the building, then slipped the heavy prison brogues from his feet. Step by step he inched near the door to the bunkhouse, then pushed it open carefully and listened. Nothing but heavy breathing and snores were to be heard from inside. He took a step nearer, then another. An instant later he reached through the darkness and secured the sack of

clothing. Still moving carefully, he backed from the bunkhouse and around to the rear of the building.

His hands shook as he removed his clothing and changed to the various articles of attire which the canvas sack contained. The Oregon breeches were too long and the plaid shirt a bit roomy, but a thrill of elation ran through Malone. He felt as though he were donning royal raiment. The boots fit well enough as did the sombrero. He began to feel like a man instead of a hunted animal.

WITH this new-found confidence, Malone grew cunning. He had meant to leave his prison things where he dropped them and flee into the brush, but now he hesitated. On arising in the morning Riker would at once miss the sack and set up an outcry. Perhaps if the sack still stood where he had left it, Riker wouldn't notice anything amiss. Maybe he had intended the new things for Sunday togs and wouldn't miss them for several days.

A hoarse chuckle escaped Malone's lips as he began stuffing his penitentiary denims into the canvas sack. He grabbed his prison shoes and the hateful peaked cap and placed them inside. Then he pulled the draw cord tight on the sack and once more opened the bunkhouse door.

He tiptoed in and replaced the closed sack on the exact spot where he had found it.

A few minutes later he was slipping noiselessly through the brush, the Circle H ranch buildings at his rear. Every once in a while he laughed happily, running his hands over his new clothing. Now he'd have less to fear when trying to find Gage Hammond. He could ask questions openly.

"I'll sure have to keep out of Riker's way, though," Malone mused. "He'll probably be sore as hell at the hombre what stole his new clothes."

Silver dawn streamed along the eastern horizon. Malone emerged cautiously on the top of a high ridge and looked down on the Circle H ranch buildings. He laughed happily and started down the ridge. Now, when he finally found Hammond, he could approach him like a man and shake hands.

CHAPTER XIII

A NEW MYSTERY FOR VULCAN

TWO of the men in the sheriff's office looked bewildered; one was furiously angry; two were puzzled. The sixth man was laughing openly at the situation.

"Like I'm telling you, Nick," Larry grinned, "you'll have to make a new start. Get up a fresh game. This time, though, you don't want to put any stock in what Riker and Grant tell you. I don't know what their game is, but they sure made you look plumb ridiculous."

The other men were still gazing at the prison clothing and heavy penitentiary brogues on the floor. Nick Vulcan held the canvas sack from which the clothing had been shaken out. Suddenly his temper got the better of him. He raised the sack aloft and, with an enraged oath, dashed it down on top of the clothing.

Then he turned, hot and shaking, to Riker and Grant: "I want to know what in hell you two are trying to pull on me! If it's a game, I should be let in. I think you're both crazy!"

"I tell you—" Riker began weakly.

"You can't tell me anything," Vulcan snapped. "Pulling me in here to make a fool of me. Dammit! I got a notion to arrest you both for contempt—"

"But, Nick," Spanish Grant tried earnestly to convince the law officer, "I saw the clothes myself. There was a plaid shirt and Oregon breeches—"

"Shut up!" Vulcan howled. "I got eyes to see what came out of that bag."

Gage Hammond looked from Riker to Grant and back to Riker. "You two been hitting the bottle?" he demanded in ugly tones.

"I ain't had a drink since yesterday," Riker said, shaking his head. "I tell you, Gage, I had the clothes. I got 'em in Crockett's bunkhouse an' shoved 'em in that sack. Right in that very sack."

"You should have shoved your head in with the clothes, Riker," said Larry.

Riker's face reddened. "You go to hell, Crockett!" he growled. He turned back to Hammond. "I brought them to our place last night. Showed 'em to Lippy and Spanish—"

"That's right," Grant affirmed.

"Lippy and Spanish will back me up," Riker insisted. "They'll swear to the togs I took from this bag—"

"Who else saw 'em?" Gage Hammond cut in.

"Nobody," Riker answered. "The other boys were asleep."

"This was last night, eh?" Sheriff Laramie asked. He had remained silent up to now, a look of puzzlement on his face. "Did you look at the things this morning?"

Riker shook his head. "No. There wasn't any particular reason to. The sack was right where I'd set it down last night. Nobody'd touched it—"

"Nobody's touched it, eh?" Vulcan broke in angrily. "Then how do you account for these things?" He indicated the prison clothing on the floor.

"I don't," Riker said helplessly. "I don't understand. I tell you—" He broke off, then, "Look, Nick, there's three of us to swear to the things I took from that sack last night. Me and Lippy and Spanish. Can't you take our word for it? Can't you believe us?"

"BELIEVE you?" Vulcan bellowed. "Hell, I don't believe anybody in this Centaur country. Everything's crooked. I can't take nobody's word. You're all renegades from white men's ways. So help me, when I get to the bottom of such cuckoo doings, there'll be a roundup of crooks that will shake the—"

"Just a minute, Nick," Laramie cut in, tight-lipped. "I hope you're not including me in those statements."

Vulcan glared at the sheriff a moment, then cooled down. "That goes without saying, John," he said more quietly. "But you can't blame me for hitting the ceiling. Here this Riker and Grant come to me, swearing they got proof of Crockett being the holdup man. Yep, they got the togs he wore, right in this bag. And like a damned fool I believed 'em. And what happens? They produce a suit of something that looks like it come from a pen!"

Larry stooped and picked up the jacket of the prison suit. Stenciled across the shoulders were the words, "State Penitentiary." Below was

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written the name of the State in which the prison was situated. Vulcan seized the jacket from Larry's grasp and read the words.

"If these things come from your place, Crockett, I'd like to know how in hell you got 'em," he snapped.

"They didn't come from my place—"

"Don't lie to me," Vulcan warned.

Larry's face suddenly sobered. "Maybe I'd better confess all," he said humbly. "It's not generally known but I was in the penitentiary. I was brought to trial and sentenced to hang—"

"What's all this bosh?" Sheriff Laramie snorted. "You were never in prison in your life, Larry."

Larry couldn't conceal the twinkle in his eye from the sheriff, but he raised one hand for quiet. "You never knew about this, John," he went on sadly.

Hammond, Riker, and Grant drew nearer. Riker began to look triumphant again. At least he had uncovered something. Vulcan looked grim and determined.

"You keep still, John," he told the sheriff. "Crockett wants to make a clean breast of things. Maybe we'll clear up a lot of the mystery around here. Go on, Crockett, make your confession."

Larry gulped and pretended to wipe a tear from his eye. "I never expected the truth to come out," he went on brokenly, "but it only goes to show that the law always catches up with a man—"

"Say, what were you in prison for?" Vulcan interrupted. "Start at the beginning and come clean."

IT was the year of the big blizzard." Larry choked a little, while his listeners drew nearer and listened attentively. "My cattle were dying off like flies. I had to

have food for them. The bank was ready to foreclose. I grew desperate." He turned to Vulcan and heaved a deep sigh. "You know, Nick, how a man will get pushed to the wall so hard he's ready to do anything, anything, to get money."

"Yes, yes," Vulcan nodded impatiently. "Go on."

Larry ran his hand over his forehead. "I thought it over for days. I didn't want to do anything like that, but I had to have money. Finally, I took my first fatal step, my first downward move in a life of horrible crime."

"Yes, what was it?" Vulcan urged tensely.

Larry turned his face away as though scarcely daring to speak the truth. A sob welled from his throat. "I went out to a street corner in a big city and stood there, with the snow beating down about my shoulders. I swore that the first man to pass should be my victim. I waited. It grew colder. Finally a man approached. He was alone. I tensed as he drew near. Then . . . then, I held out my tin cup to him and begged for money. The officers arrested me for vagrancy. I was sent to the penitentiary—"

A howl of angry rage came from Nick Vulcan. His face was crimson with fury. "Crockett—you—" he sputtered, unable to find words. He realized that Larry was shaking, not with sobs, but with laughter. Even Sheriff Laramie was chuckling. Hammond and his men looked blankly at each other, then they, too, grew angry.

Vulcan finally found his voice. He was dangerously calm when he spoke. "All right, Crockett, you were ribbing me. You took me in. But when my turn comes it won't be so funny. And it's coming. Don't forget that. I'm not sure just what Riker found at your place, but I'm keeping these clothes until I can get word to the penitentiary and learn something about them." He stuffed the brogues and denim clothing into the sack and started toward the door.

"Wait, Nick," Riker said, seizing him by the arm, "won't it do any good for me and Lippy and Spanish to swear to what I got at Crockett's?"

"You!" Vulcan snarled. "I wouldn't believe you or your pals under oath. And next time you bring me proof of anything, don't make any mistakes, or I'll throw you in a cell."

He jerked his arm angrily from Riker's grasp and strode out of the sheriff's office, carrying the canvas sack with him.

"We-ell," Riker commenced weakly, "I don't know—"

"Come on, you two," Hammond said grimly. "We're getting out of here. I've got a few questions to ask you, myself."

The three pushed out of the office, slamming the door behind them. Larry again seated himself on the cot in the sheriff's office.

"Gosh, that was funny," he chuckled. "And the look on Vulcan's face when I was confessing to my horrible life of crime."

"I know, it was funny—now," agreed the sheriff. "But if ever Vulcan—or Hammond either—get a chance to put the screws to you, they'll bear down hard. It's no laughing matter, boy."

Larry sobered a trifle and nodded. "I suppose you're right. But they were so sure they had me in a tight and—"

"Larry," the sheriff interrupted,

"what do you know about those prison clothes?"

"Not one damn thing," Larry said truthfully.

The sheriff sighed. "I wish I could believe what you say. You admitted that canvas sack came from your place—"

"Hell!" Larry grinned. "I forgot I was going to have you arrest Riker for stealing that sack from my place."

"You'd better let well enough alone," Laramie advised. "But how do you figure it?"

"I don't." Larry shook his head. "Riker stole that sack from my place, intending some sort of frame-up. Somehow his plans missed fire, but I don't know how. He and Grant were as surprised as anybody else when those denims came tumbling out of the sack."

THE sheriff shook his head. There was silence in the office for a few moments.

"You were going to send somebody out to relieve Wishbone, this morning," Larry reminded, at last.

The sheriff's face clouded. "I plumb forgot that. This business of Buchanan escaping got me all mixed up in my thoughts."

"Joan needs somebody there," Larry said seriously. "There's just her and the Mex girl. In case anything should happen—"

"What could happen?" Laramie asked quickly.

"I don't know, but Buchanan was shooting at somebody yesterday. Maybe it was me, maybe it wasn't. Maybe he was just trying to scare her out of the country. If that's the case, who gave him such orders? Next time it might amount to more than a scare."

The sheriff looked troubled. He didn't say anything.

"How many keys are there to Joan's house?" Larry asked.

"Two that I know of," Laramie said slowly. "Joan had one, and I've had one around here for years, ever since her dad died. I gave that one to her, yesterday, before she started out with you."

Larry nodded. "You took a right good stock of supplies out to the Rafter B last week," he said casually.

Laramie nodded. "I figured she'd better have plenty of everything."

"She has. With what was there you must have cooked yourself a right good meal when you arrived with the supplies."

The sheriff shook his head. "I didn't stop to eat, let alone cook anything. Now that you speak of it, I remember I meant to clean out the stove, but it clean slipped my mind."

"Anybody been living there recent, John?"

Laramie shook his head. "The place has been plumb deserted."

"Somebody's been staying there," Larry said slowly. "I saw footprints in the dust on the floor when I first went in the house."

The sheriff looked startled. "Probably mine," he said doubtfully.

"Maybe. But you said you didn't build a fire. Somebody has. I cleaned out the stove. There was a charred piece of newspaper in there that didn't burn. The date line shows that it was within the last year."

"T'hell you say." Laramie looked disturbed.

"She needs a man there, or two men, out there with her," Larry said seriously.

The sheriff weighed the matter.

"Look, Larry," he said finally, "do me a favor, will you?"

"Anything I can, John."

"I'm going to be right busy for a day or two, cleaning up odds and ends."

"You figuring to take that vacation I mentioned."

THE sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Well, not right away. I've been thinking things over. I'd hate to have it look as if I'd quit under fire. If anybody wants to criticize me for letting Buchanan escape, let 'em. I'll stay and take my medicine."

"I understand," Larry said slowly, then repeated, "I understand, John."

The sheriff looked at him closely, then glanced away. "I'm getting pretty careless for this job, of course."

Larry disregarded that. "You mentioned something about doing you a favor," he reminded.

The sheriff nodded. "I'm leading up to that. It's this way. I've got one or two personal reasons for not being the one to hire anybody for Joan—" He paused, then went on lamely, "That is, I expect to be busy. Suppose you look around and see if you can find a couple of good men. If necessary, I'll take care of their wages, though that can be between you and me. Anyway, you see what you can do about getting Joan some help. And get men who aren't afraid of gunfire. I'll appreciate it a heap if you'll do this for me."

"I'll be glad to do it, John. I

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think I know just the right men, too. Hoddy Jefferson and Joe Dinsmore. They left Fanning's 9 Bar outfit a month ago, you know. They figured to pull out and see something of the country. Then they got into a poker game, and lost their money. By that time, Fanning had hired men to take their place. They've been hanging around, hoping a job would show up."

"They're both good men," Laramie agreed.

Larry got to his feet. "I'll go find them now if they're still in town. Meanwhile, John, don't take Buchanan's escape too seriously. If the criticism gets too tough, let me know. You've still got friends in Vista Wells, you know."

"Thanks, Larry." The old sheriff's eyes looked thoughtful as he sat at his desk, gazing through the side window.

Larry stepped through the door and out to the street, saying "S'long" as he closed the door behind him. He had a feeling that Laramie wanted to be alone with his own thoughts for a time.

CHAPTER XIV

GUN SMOKE!

IT was approaching noontime now. After leaving the sheriff's office, Larry sauntered along the shady side of the street until he came to the Cloverleaf Saloon. Glancing in above the swinging doors, he saw Hoddy Jefferson and Joe Dinsmore seated disconsolately at a round table across from the bar, playing cards for matches. A few men stood drinking at the bar.

Larry went directly to the table at which the two men were seated. Hoddy Jefferson was a weather-beaten man in his early forties, dressed in overalls and a woolen shirt. A Colt gun hung at his side. Joe Dinsmore was a few years younger. He, too, wore puncher togs. Both men looked capable.

They glanced up in surprise as Larry pulled up a chair and sat down between them.

"How's tricks?" Larry inquired after preliminary greetings had been disposed of.

Hoddy Jefferson chuckled. "Speaking of tricks, it looks like you pulled some sort of trick off on Steve Riker. He claims he had proof you're the man held up the stage yesterday—"

"And then his proof backfired," Joe Dinsmore broke in.

Larry noticed that the customers at the bar had swung around to listen.

"Riker's sure mad," Hoddy went on. "He's been telling it all over town that you're the holdup man, Larry."

"Not that we believed him, of course," Joe put in hastily.

Larry grinned. "I don't know just what sort of a game they were trying to frame," he said, "but something went wrong. Of course, a man's enemies are always ready to believe the worst. Riker never did like me, so I'll leave matters to your own judgment."

"Sure, sure," Hoddy nodded. "We didn't put no stock in the story. Still and all, Larry, you ought to close his trap for him."

"That'll be taken care of, too, in good time," Larry promised. "Meanwhile, how you two hombres getting along?"

Hoddy laughed bitterly at the question. "We ain't getting along any too well," he said. "We hocked our saddles this morning. We hated to do it, but hell, a man has to eat."

"Too dang many poker players around the Warbonnet," Joe added.

"I told Hoddy if we stayed there we'd be getting into another game and losing what we borrowed on our saddles. So we come down here and we been passing the time playing cards for matches in hopes that a job might pass by."

"Joan Bristol is figuring to start operations at the Rafter B, you know," Larry said.

Hoddy nodded. "We sort of figured to ask Sheriff John to put in a word for us there as soon as she got settled. Of course, we might have a job before then."

"There's some dang careless lead-throwing takes place, now and then," Larry said significantly. "Some of it passed in Joan Bristol's direction yesterday. I brought in the man who did it. Buck Buchanan. He escaped from jail."

"You mean—"

"I mean Joan Bristol needs protection. The men who take the job may have to face guns. I don't know for sure. Do you want the job?"

"Do we?" Hoddy shouted.

"I don't care how many guns I face," Joe said enthusiastically, "just so long as I eat regularly."

LARRY drew out a roll of bills and peeled off a couple of twenties. "Go get your saddles and ride out to the Rafter B. You'll find Wishbone Herrick there. Tell Miss Joan you're hired. I'll take care of the money end."

"I should think the sheriff would be doing the hiring for Miss Joan," said Hoddy.

"What do you care who hires you so long as you got jobs. You might let Joan understand, though, that Sheriff John did the hiring. However, don't talk about that too much. Now, on your way."

The two men rose quickly. Larry cut their thanks short and followed them out to the street. He left them hastening in the direction of the livery stable, then he himself proceeded on down toward the Warbonnet Saloon.

There was a considerable crowd in the bar when Larry entered. The customers swung around to look at him, and several nodded greetings. Larry glanced along the bar.

At the far end, Gage Hammond, Steve Riker, and Spanish Grant stood talking, low-voiced. Near the middle of the long counter, Nick Vulcan had his head bent over a tumbler of bourbon, into which he gazed with moody contemplation.

Larry tapped him on the shoulder. "Drink up, then have one on me, Nick."

Vulcan glanced at Larry. "Don't want any more to drink," he grunted peevishly.

"No hard feelings, I hope," said Larry.

"What do you think?" Vulcan snapped.

The other customers were watching the two curiously. At the end of the bar, Hammond and his men had also turned their attention on them. Larry dropped his voice. "Look here, Nick, I know how you feel about catching that hombre that held up the stage. You thought sure you had me dead to rights, but, after all, you only had Riker's word for it. Now don't blame *me* just because *his* scheme went wrong. You're too fair-minded for that, I figure. Sure, I ribbed you some. Under the circumstances you can't blame me for getting a laugh out of the business. Look at it my way, won't you?"

Gradually, under Larry's persuasive tones, the anger faded from Vulcan's face. He smiled a bit sheepishly. Well, you sure made me

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mad for a spell there, Larry."

"Was it my fault?"

"No. Damn that Riker, anyway." Vulcan tossed off his drink. "Now I'll have one with you."

Larry called the bartender to bring a bottle and another glass. While Vulcan and Larry poured their drinks, the tension in the saloon eased somewhat.

"The funny thing is," Vulcan growled genially, "I'm half inclined to believe Riker. What went wrong with his plans, I don't know, but I suspect you of having a hand in it."

Larry laughed. "Hell, Nick, there's a limit to what I'm able to do. I'm no magician."

"Sometimes I doubt that, too," said Vulcan. "At any rate," he went on, "you can't say Riker lacks nerve. He's told everybody that you're the holdup man. I'd say he was asking for trouble."

"I heard he'd been talking," Larry said coolly.

"Folks don't know what to think," Vulcan continued. "Riker sure makes it sound convincing, he's so damn positive in his statements. At the same time everybody knows there's no love lost between you and Hammond's outfit, so you're sort of receiving the benefit of the doubt until such time as more definite information can be had."

"It doesn't look like Riker, or you, can get it," Larry said easily.

Vulcan's face went grim. "If I do get positive information," he said harshly, "it'll go tough with you, Crockett."

"I imagine so. Well, we'll worry about that bronc when he gets out of the corral."

AT that moment Larry noticed Hammond and his two followers striding toward him. From the looks on their faces they had reached some momentous decision.

"We got it figured out," Ham-

mond told Vulcan.

"Got what figured out?" Vulcan demanded coldly.

"Just where those togs went to."

Larry looked at Riker. "Hello, sucker," he grinned.

Riker went white with anger. "We'll show you who's the sucker in a few minutes."

"I'm waiting," Vulcan grunted.

Spanish Grant tried to swing around behind Larry. Larry turned his back to the bar so he could see all three men. At the same moment he moved his gun a trifle nearer the front. A silence had fallen on the saloon. The other customers backed away a few feet, forming a half circle about the men at the bar, glancing from Larry to Hammond, and back to Larry again.

"It's this way," Hammond began. "Any sensible man will take Riker's word against Crockett's. Ain't that so, Vulcan?"

"I don't know as it is," Vulcan said shortly. "I consider myself a sensible man."

"Anyway," Hammond persisted, "anything Riker says is gospel as far as I'm concerned."

"What do you know about gospel, Hammond?" Larry sneered.

"Another crack like that out of

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you, Crockett," Spanish Grant snarled, "and somebody's going to close your trap—for good!"

"You're looking pretty healthy right now, Grant," Larry said quietly. "Don't you want to stay that way?"

"Meaning what?" Grant demanded.

"Draw your own conclusions," Larry said. "You can call that a warning, if you like."

"By hell!" Grant said hotly. "I believe you're looking for trouble."

"I'm not running away from it," Larry told him.

"Drop it, Grant," Hammond ordered. "We got Crockett dead to rights, anyway." He turned back to Vulcan. "Like I say, I believe Riker when he says he took those clothes from Crockett's bunkhouse. Hell! Lippy Vaughn saw them and so did Spanish. They'll both swear to it—"

"You been through all that before," Vulcan interrupted wearily. "What I'm interested in is where the clothes went to."

"I'm getting to that," said Hammond. "Look at it this way! Riker went to Crockett's bunkhouse and picked up those togs. We'll say Crockett rode into his ranch about that time and saw Riker leaving. Crockett followed him to the Circle H and spied around. Probably looked through a window and saw Riker showing the things to Lippy and Spanish. Realizing that the jig was up unless he could get those clothes back, Crockett hung around until everybody was asleep, then snuk into our bunkhouse and took the clothes—"

A burst of laughter from Larry interrupted the words. "That's a lulu of a yarn, but it won't hold water, Hammond. I suppose I carried those prison togs with me, just for that purpose. What would be my idea in leaving them?"

"So we wouldn't notice the ex-

change so soon," Riker said triumphantly.

"But where would I get them from?"

"From what we're learning about you," Grant sneered, "I'm beginnin' to think you've owned several suits of 'em."

Larry shook his head in amusement. "That story reminds me of a damn poor shot throwing lead at a target."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hammond.

"Full of holes, but no bull's-eyes," Larry grinned.

Laughter sounded through the barroom.

"Just a minute," Vulcan growled, "Maybe Hammond's story isn't so funny. He might not have made a bull's-eye, but there's a chance he scored somethin'." He looked at Larry narrowly. "Why couldn't you have worked it that way?"

"Where would I have got the prison clothes?"

"Leave them out of it. That's a detail to be settled later. Come on, Crockett, there's something to explain. You're just the sort of hombre to pull something like that, snatching those togs out of the Circle H bunkhouse, right from under the noses of the men there. I think Hammond's hit it."

"Sure he has," Riker grinned. "We figured it all out."

JUST what time was it when you sneaked into my place and stole that canvas sack you claim you had those clothes in?" Larry asked Riker.

"Around eight thirty last night," the Circle H man said promptly.

"I couldn't be two places at once," Larry pointed out. "About the time you left my place, I was leaving the Rafter B, bringing Buck Buchanan into town. I was at the sheriff's until after midnight. Then I headed for home."

"I'll vouch for that," Vulcan nodded. "I had a drink with you just before you pulled out."

Confidence was fading from the faces of Hammond and his men. "Maybe you didn't go home," Hammond said lamely. "You might have rode right to my place."

"There'd be no reason for that," Larry declared. "If—you'll notice I say *if*—those bandit togs had been at my place and Riker had taken them, I wouldn't have known about it, anyway. I was on the road to the Rafter B all afternoon."

"Damn your hide!" Riker said angrily. "You don't get out of it that easy!" Seeing the enemy slip through his fingers, Riker lost his temper. He knew what he said next wasn't true, but he was too angry to consider his words.

"Here's what probably happened," he said. "On his way in with Buchanan, Crockett rode over to his place and saw me leaving. That's how he got wise that his bandit togs were missing."

Larry laughed contemptuously. "Why don't you ask Buchanan about that?"

"Yes, ask Buchanan!" Hammond said triumphantly. "You know damn well, Crockett, that Buchanan has escaped."

"That's your story," Larry said easily. "Now I'll tell one of my own. It's true, as Nick Vulcan said, that he saw me ride out of town last night. But I didn't go far. I turned back and waited in the shadow between two buildings. I saw you head for bed, Nick. Later, when everything had quieted down, I saw Gage Hammond heading

down toward the jail. This morning Buchanan is gone."

A sudden murmuring of voices rose in the saloon. Hammond went white. "Are you . . . you saying I helped him escape?" he stammered.

"What do *you* know about Buchanan's escape, Crockett?" Vulcan demanded, swinging around to face Larry.

"Just as much as I've said," Larry said flatly. "When I get ready, maybe I'll say more."

"Look here," Hammond argued doggedly, "that couldn't have been me you saw walking toward the jail."

Larry ignored him and turned to Nick Vulcan. "Maybe you'll get your fill of listening to these hombres' wild tales after a while, Nick. They're so damn anxious to pin that holdup on me, they'll say anything. I'm getting plumb weary of the whole business. Some day I'll decide I've been pushed far enough, and I'll start opening up." He faced Hammond and his men. "You Circle H hombres heard my *habla*. It's a warning!"

Without another word he swung on his heel and strode from the saloon. Vulcan started to put up a hand to check him, then let him pass. Turning to Hammond, he said coldly, "You're going to prod Crockett too far one of these days, Hammond. Hereafter you'd better make sure of proof. And don't bother me with any more of your fairy stories. I'm getting right fed up myself. And just what did you go down toward the jail for last night?"

"Crockett's a liar if he says that," Hammond said boldly. He swung around to Riker. "Steve, you go *get* Crockett," he ordered, giving him a meaning look. "We'll make him prove his statement. *Get* him, see?"

Riker tensed almost imperceptibly. Then he nodded and strode from the saloon. On the sidewalk he saw Larry just entering a restaurant across the street. Riker leaped to the center of the roadway, jerking his gun.

"Hey, Crockett!" he yelled. Without waiting for a response, he pulled trigger.

Will Crockett be able to save himself from Steve Riker's cold-blooded gunplay? What does Scar-beak Malone plan to do? Has Gage Hammond some hold over Sheriff Laramie? The fourth installment of this range-land mystery serial appears in next week's issue.

Six-pistol Medicine

Continued from page 46

pistol and aim with terrible deliberation at Mayor Bone. The echoes of his three shots slammed against the town walls and the impact of the leads was plainly audible. Convinced suddenly that he had been wrong in his judgment of the mayor, Jeff swung his gun to down the little outlaw who had betrayed his trust. Then again bewilderment had him in its cruel grip.

The voice of Smith R. Bone, weak and stricken, dominated the succeeding silence.

"Blast him to hell, boys! The. . . . the Hellcat crossed me!"

It happened then, so quickly Jeff couldn't have changed it had he been cool and ready. Five forms slid from the bank portal. Five guns flamed in the night. The Kid staggered, then fell as if cut off at the knee. Then five men, each carrying loot, were running to the waiting horses. And all Jeff's puzzlement was gone.

He dropped two of them before they reached the rack. He got two more as they mounted. He dropped a fifth as he flashed away from the bar, then proved himself human by missing the one who had been holding the ponies, missed him only because he had spurred out in advance of his mates.

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Gun empty, Jeff had no eyes for the death littering the street. And he had no ears for the sudden tumult of a town awakened by gunplay. He made one quick dash to the bank front and knelt beside the outlaw known as John Law. The youth, not quite conscious, was gasping, stabbed with a lethal pain. Jeff groaned at sight of him, gathered him into his arms.

"Hit hard, Kid?"

"No . . . no questions, Jeff," grunted the Kid. "I'm goin' . . . fast. Done somethin' to wipe out all the black against me, for the one gent who's treated me white. It was Bone all the time, boss. You killed his brother in a raid before I come. He hated you, but was too cowardly to tackle you alone. He knowed me, minute I come here, played me for the coyote I'd been . . . before I met you. I let him think I was backin' his play, even up to lettin' him toll you here. But when it came to killin', it was him I was loaded for, not you. Gettin' sleepy, boss. Goin' out—" The Hillkitty Kid smiled, gave a convulsive jerk and stiffened as Jeff Pittman's arms still held him.

They buried John Law and Mayor Smith R. Bone together. Finest funeral Rifle Gap ever staged, according to most. The town turned out en masse to honor them as heroes and the granite shafts, bought by popular subscription to grace their graves, records them as such to this day.

Jeff Pittman never told anyone what really happened that night, not even his wife. For no one could have understood it fully. Those two, the broadcloth-garbed mayor and the young outlaw, had destroyed each other as surely as if they had duelled to the death. And out of their passing had come peace to Rifle Gap.

THE END.

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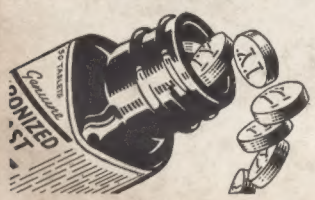

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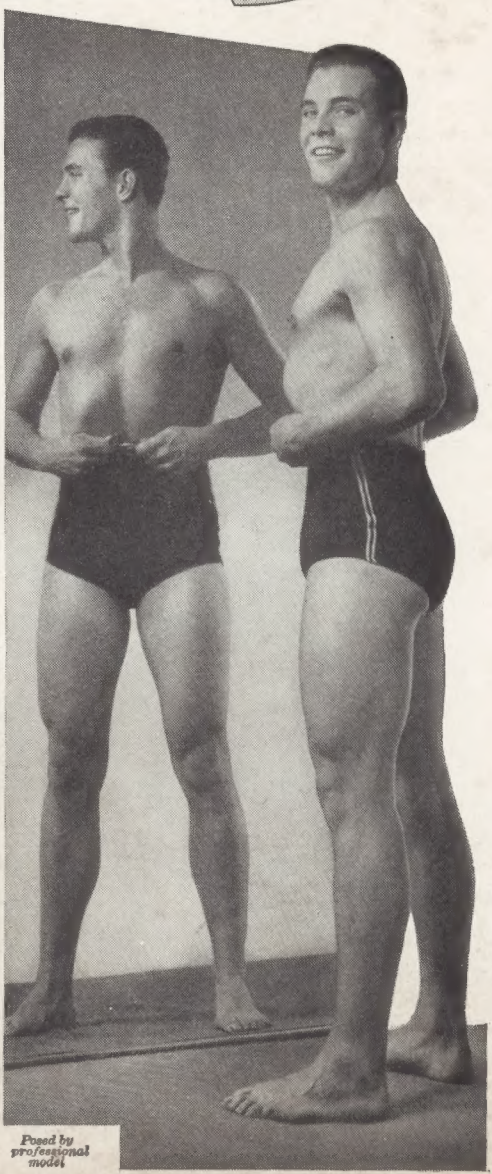

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